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The Writing

Chapter 1

15 October 2012

Renowned violinist Jaap Schröder and fellow members of the Skálholt Quartet performed in a free concert at Gasson Hall at Boston College on Saturday night. After offering quartets by Haydn and Boccherini, they were joined by Owen Watkins, a Boston-area performer on historical wind instruments, for the Mozart Clarinet Quintet.

At 86, Schröder is something of a grand old man of the early music movement, holding the position of concertmaster with the Academy of Ancient Music in the early 1980s, and amassing a significant discography of historically informed performance. He may also be remembered locally as an early member of Aston Magna.

The Skálholt Quartet: Schröder and Rut Ingólfdóttir, violins; Svava Berhnaðdóttir, viola; and Sigurður Halldórsson, cello; is the by-product of a 1996 request for the members to play Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* at Skálholt cathedral in the south of Iceland. They have been playing and recording together ever since.

The program opened with the Boccherini Quartet in A, op. 32, no. 6, and the Haydn Quartet in C, op. 54, no. 2. The collective sound from the players' gut strings more than filled the voluminous 350-seat hall. The pieces presented real contrasts. The Boccherini is a genial but strongly colored collection of movements. The Haydn has a surface of seriousness but is full of moments of characteristic humor. On this evening, Schröder's tone lacked focus and projection, at times disappearing in the more full-throated accompaniment of his peers. But there were moments of great ensemble playing, and Schröder employed end-of-phrase rubato with strong effect. The Skálholt didn't seem to find the same humor in the Haydn that I do; this was high church Haydn from start to finish.

The focus of the concert was on the Mozart, for which Owen Watkins played on a historically accurate basset clarinet of his own making. Clarinetists both bless and curse Anton Stadler, Mozart's inspiration for both the Quintet and the Clarinet Concerto. Stadler was one of the first great clarinetists, renowned for his singing tone, and without him these cornerstones of the clarinet repertoire would not exist. However, he was an experimenter, and the instrument for which Mozart's great works are written are not the "standard" clarinet of his date, but for his preferred

instrument at the time, what we now call a "basset clarinet." Watkins' basset clarinet was longer than a regular clarinet, a full major third lower than the standard clarinet, and it contained a cylindrical resonator at the end rather than the usual bell. As he walked onstage it resembled an ancient and ornate golf club.

The other reason to curse Stadler is that he was given the autograph manuscripts of both the Quintet and Concerto, and managed to lose both of them. The earliest versions we have of the pieces come from printings in the early 1800s, some 10 or more years after its composition, and they were arranged for the standard clarinet. Once you know the pieces were written for basset clarinet, you can guess at passages that would benefit musically from having an instrument with an extended lower register — places where the melodic line suddenly jumps as it hits the end of the instrument, or arpeggios that "bounce back" when they go too low. It is an irony that the arguably two finest compositions for the "clarinet" use an instrument that is not the clarinet we know; that we can only speculate about how Mozart used the extended range of the instrument, since the autographs were lost; and finally, that these two pieces are the only pieces for that unusual instrument.

Owen Watkins is a virtuoso performer on historical clarinets, oboes and recorders. He is also a member of Boston's legendary Von Huene early music workshop and a colleague of Schröder's. Six months before Schröder came to Boston, he called Watkins and told him they must play the Mozart together. There was one problem, though — Watkins did not have a basset clarinet! Although you can purchase a modern basset clarinet, it is simply a modern instrument that has been lengthened. True historical basset clarinets are not easy to come by, but he is a maker of instruments as well as a player, so he set to work. He took the top half an historical clarinet he had on hand, and proceeded to make his own lower joint. In six months, he had the basset clarinet we heard on Saturday.

So how did it sound? My first reaction on hearing the instrument was surprise at how much it sounded "just like a clarinet." The apparent rusticity of the instrument had prepared me for something a bit rawer. The clarinet initially got its name from the clarion, or "trumpet", quality in its upper register, and I half-expected some trumpeting forth, I suppose. In fact, the tone of the instrument was rather softer and less incisive than a modern instrument; it was "sweeter" than the usual modern clarinet. In the higher registers it sounded more plaintive than steely, more English horn than modern clarinet. This enabled it to both blend well with the gut strings while remaining in the front of the sound.

The modern clarinet is a triumph of metal engineering, bristling with chrome keys that could not have been made in Stadler's time. These enable the playing of a full chromatic scale without excessively awkward fingering, while keeping most notes generally in tune. The lack of elaborate keying makes fingering the older instrument more complex, and means some notes have perceptibly different tone color. Mostly these differences were heard in only passing, though at some points these differences were more profound. In the more harmonically wayward eight-notes in the first movement development, or in a repeated half-step figure in the minuet, they gave a unique personality to the sound.

The lack of the autograph manuscript means we have no definitive interpretive notations — dynamics and articulations. The ensemble did not provide any surprises interpretively, but the

clarinet's articulations were in several places unexpected. Hearing them (and seeing what I could of the player's right hand), it appeared that at least some of those choices were made in order to make the passage fit the demands of the instrument. It would be fascinating to know if these choices were the ones Mozart would have heard, and if it is possible that behind the somewhat fossilized and "obvious" choices one hears nowadays, there is the possibility for a much more varied range of interpretation based on the demands of the instrument itself.

The performance was graceful and understated, the first movement especially successful and heartfelt. Watkins played with confidence and virtuosity despite the demands of the older instrument. The piece gives all the players interesting work, and they clearly enjoyed the give and take. The capacity audience appreciated the effort as well, granting a standing ovation at the end of the evening. Perhaps some orchestra may make it possible for us to hear this unique instrument in the only other piece written for it?

Chapter 2

20 October 2012

"They just played Pictures at an Exhibition. It was amazing. This sentence may be all you need to know about the Marine Band concert at Symphony Hall Friday night. That, and the fact that it was a text sent by the adolescent boy sitting in front of me. The Marine Band, "The President's Own", is the nation's oldest professional musical organization, and it knows its business well. Sixty well-drilled players with fantastic technique consistently deliver a popular, uplifting experience calculated to amaze. This free concert drew a large audience that was younger, more varied and more enthusiastic than I am used to seeing Symphony Hall. The presentation was that of a Pops concert – the first "piece" was a conductorless fanfare that would not have been out of place at an awards show, which ushered on and then underscored GySgt (The rank titles presented here are taken verbatim from the program. I trust others with more knowledge of the military will know what they mean.) Kevin Bennear, credited as the "concert moderator".

What the Band it does well, it does extremely well. The Marine Band playing Sousa is a tautology – the one is the sound of the other, like the Vienna Philharmonic playing waltzes. They offered two inevitabilities, "Semper Fidelis" and "Stars and Stripes Forever", which were thrilling. They played one rarity, "The Aviators," which was instantly forgettable, despite being played with the same skill and intensity.

The Band performed two "modern" works, modern only in the sense of having been written recently. John Mackey's Asphalt Cocktail (2009), transcribed by MSgt Donald Patterson, was not a success. GySgt Bennear, using the composer's words, described it as a tonal depiction of "the scariest NYC taxi ride you can imagine, with the cab skidding around turns as trucks bear down from all sides." He left out another phrase the composer uses in his notes to the score: "That title screams Napoleonic Testosterone Music. I was born to write that!" Yes, that was about right. It was simply too loud and congested to make a coherent impression. When the end of your piece features a percussionist tossing around a large aluminum garbage can and you can't hear it, something has gone awry.

Michael Gandolfi is the Chair of the Department of Composition at the New England Conservatory, and was in attendance for the Band's performance of his piece Flourishes and Meditations

on a Renaissance Theme. Commissioned by the band, this was an attractive set of neoromantic, tonal variations on a Spanish theme from Rodrigo. After the frontal tutti assault of the Mackey, Gandolfi's much lighter touch was a relief. Much of the piece was either antiphonal, or constructed of ostinatos under the chorale-like theme. Here and there were occasional surprises – a small eruption of dissonance here and there, a moment of brief structural disintegration near the end which made me hope for more exciting transformations, but which quickly subsided. He had the courage to end his piece quietly, alone of all the works on the program. It was pleasant, professional and beautifully crafted, but slight, and the audience became audibly restive as the performance stretched past ten minutes.

The major piece on the program was Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, orchestrated by Ravel, transcribed by Paul Lavender. That is correct – Ravel's orchestration merely "transcribed" for band. I love the sounds of bands and wind ensembles, and I have little patience with those who belittle them. So I am frustrated when bands present European classical music in slavish arrangements meant to reproduce some familiar piece rather than exploit the unique possibilities of the instruments provided them. The Mussorgsky was exactly this, a respectful, inoffensive and uninspiring rote reproduction of an overexposed piece. Colonel Michael J. Colburn's direction was metronomic, and his tempos were far too rapid for the slow movements, as if to avoid boring a restless audience.

The most successful work of the night, apart from the incomparable Sousa, was Mendelssohn's Concertpiece No. 2 in D minor, Op. 114, a "duo concerto" for clarinets featuring MGySgt Lisa Kadala and MGySgt Jeffrey Strouf as soloists. This is not great Mendelssohn – which means it is tuneful, well-constructed and ingratiating, if not touching or thought-provoking. It is in three quite brief movements, fast-slow-fast, each of which ends at just the right time as the material exhausts itself. The transcription, by Thomas Fox, reduced the 60-person ensemble to 20, half of whom played clarinet. The result was charming; the sound of massed clarinets properly deployed is a beautiful thing too rarely heard. The soloists were note-perfect and pitch-perfect, and were content to simply place the notes in front of us, rapidly and in tune and barely touched with interpretation. It was not moving or thought-provoking. However, it was amazing.

Chapter 3

4 November 2012

The Long Duo, sisters Beatrice and Christina Long, played a duo-piano concert at Jordan Hall on Saturday night, under the auspices of the Foundation for Chinese Performing Arts. The sisters come from a musical Taiwanese family and have achieved a measure of renown both as a duo and as individual solo performers, appearing around the world, and with such American orchestras as the Baltimore and Dallas Symphonies.

The Duo has a well-formed aesthetic and a highly accomplished technique that nevertheless does not draw attention to itself. They play as one player; their attacks simultaneous and their long lines pass back and forth without seam. But their interpretive choices are restrained to the point of reticence. Now, if that is all you demand of music making, you cannot quibble with their playing. I found them consistently faithful to the text before them, but could not find the animating principle behind their playing, or their programming. Their considerable skills were brought to bear against a program that was puzzlingly varied, and which I found only erratically illuminating.

The first half was a bizarre grab bag of pieces arranged without any discernible rationale beyond that of variety. It began with Mozart's Magic Flute overture, in an unfussy arrangement by Busoni; all of the Mozart was there, but there was little sense of drama. It was curious that the adagios, which in the original rely so much on sustained strings and winds, were more effective than the skittery allegros, which got swallowed up in an unusually resonant acoustic this evening. It was accurate but un-playful.

This was followed by a single movement wrenched from Olivier Messiaen's Visions de l'Amen, turning it from a study of a particular variety of religious ecstasy into a virtuoso showpiece performed with great skill and taste. The rather frantic birdsong Messiaen writes into the piece was crystalline over the rich modal intonations of the melody. It was a pretty thing.

Exactly why this level of playing was brought to bear on the next piece, Takeshi Asai's Spring Thunder, is unclear. The New York based composer wrote this work in 2010. The program described it as "mood music [with] jazz-toned piano meanderings." That strikes me as exactly right.

The most successful piece in the first half was a relative unknown Silhouettes, Op. 24 of Anton Arensky. We were presented with 80% of it; of the five movements, four were presented; no reason was given as to why the fourth was omitted. These are "characteristic" pieces, each with its own title: "The Scholar," "The Coquette," "The Buffoon," "The Dancer." They were not sophisticated renderings, but they were spot on. Our Scholar is depicted by a grave and dense melody deep in the bass end of the keyboards which then gives way to — just wait — a fugue. Arensky managed a mediocre fugue, which burned itself out quickly, but only after it had successfully painted its picture. Similarly the flighty melody in triple time that depicts Coquette nearly made me laugh out loud. All the movements successfully evoked entertaining, broad-stroked caricatures. This is not music you want to think about too much, and I doubt it could carry much interpretive burden. The Duo's conservative approach served the movements well, executing each with aplomb and then dispatching it to move on to the next. I will be certain to seek out this piece again, if only to hear the fourth movement, "The Dreamer", to figure out why the sisters chose to exclude it from its siblings.

The strengths and weaknesses of the Duo were shown in relief in the second half of the program. It consisted of two Bach concerti for two keyboards: BWV 1061a in C Major and 1062 in C Minor. For these they were joined by the St. Botolph Strings, described in the program as an ensemble" of 18 top level players from the New England Conservatory of Music, coached by Lynn Chang." Both pieces were performed without conductor. The strings were wasted on the C Major concerto, whose orchestration was perfunctory at best. The first two movements of the piece consist of the keyboards tossing music back and forth, with much imitation and a constant sixteenth-note pulse. The last movement is a five-voice fugue which moved along quickly, if rather densely. I don't know if a more opinionated performance would have made this music more engaging. What we were given did not make a persuasive case for it.

What a surprise, then, to find the C Minor concerto thought provoking. Given musical material to work with, the St. Botolph Strings provided a new palette of colors and a youthful urgency that made every statement of that material propulsive. It is as though the normal hierarchy of the concerto had been inverted, that the solo keyboards were in fact playing a complex intellectual accompaniment to the impassioned fragmentary statements of the strings. It was not typical Bach, to be sure, and a companion referred to the performance as "relentless," which I suppose it was. The middle Adagio Ovvero Largo moved along especially quickly, but to me, even that uncovered something interesting, giving the pizzicatos in the strings a melodic connectedness, and making the sudden arco two-thirds of the way through a real event.

Before playing the Messiaen, the duo warned the audience of the "dissonance" that was about to ensue. This was the only address they made to the audience all night. Why would they program a piece about which they felt the need to warn their audience? Why would they put out a warning on a piece whose dissonance is relatively innocuous? Visions de l'Amen is hardly Boulez or Babbitt. The Long Duo is deeply committed to its craft, but I am left feeling that they are uncertain about what they are crafting, and for whom they wish to offer it.

Chapter 4

12 November 2012

The 20th-century saw an outpouring of classical music entirely unlike that which had been written in the previous three hundred years. The crumbling of tonality emboldened serious composers to experiment with alternative ways of organizing sound. Concert audiences have, in the main, failed to accept these pieces. Yet this music was the life's work of deeply creative and intelligent people who were saying something about the world in which they found themselves. Finding a human connection is the main goal of Xenakis In First Person, a hybrid theater work and concert of the music of the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, which is being presented by Alea III at the Tsai Performing Arts Center this Wednesday at 8:00 p.m. Admission is free.

The concept for the piece originated with Alexandros Mouzas, a Greek composer, and the acting texts were assembled by musicologist, composer and Xenakis scholar Antonios Antonopoulos. Mouzas and Antinopoulos are in Boston to prepare the piece, which was first presented in Athens in 2011. It alternates scenes of Xenakis (played by actor Jake Murphy) in his study with performances of his works. The texts are taken from Xenakis's own words, as found in his writing and in recorded interviews. Mouzas says he asked Antonopoulos to look for "texts that showed who Xenakis really is as a person. What he felt about life, about art; about his wife, about Greece, about politics." By presenting Xenakis in his own words, the hope is that the audience will be willing to take a step closer to Xenakis's music.

Xenakis was a man of passion and intellect, who came of age amid the violence of the twentieth century. He was, in many ways, an epitome of the twentieth century intellectual and artist. He was the child of Greek parents in Romania; he lost his mother at the age of five; when the Greek civil war came, he fought the English. He was severely injured in the war, losing his left eye. He was an architect of some accomplishment, working for a time in Le Corbusier's studio, as well as a mathematician and later, a computer programmer.

The range of Xenakis's music is immense, which makes it difficult to give a simple description of his style. He is closer in spirit to Varèse than to Schoenberg. Schoenbergian twelve-tone music, for all of its still-provocative radicalism, was a relatively conservative reaction to the crisis of tonality. A serialist composer is still thinking of classical music as the arrangement of specific pitches at

specific times. The order of pitches is critical to a serialist— but most listeners struggle to hear or comprehend those pitches without the context provided by harmony. The units of work in Xenakis include pitches and rhythms, but are also frequently textures or gestures – clusters of notes, glissandi, and patterns of density. Xenakis devised his own set of principles for developing music given this change of emphasis, and he famously did so using mathematical processes, frequently involving statistical methods involving chance. This was not Cagean chance – Xenakis once said that "all chance must be calculated" – but it was certainly different from the authoritarian control to which serialism often aspired.

Mouzas and Antonopoulos are quick to point out that Xenakis's mathematics were a starting point and not an end in themselves; Antonopoulos: "Yes, he used the mathematics, and the book he wrote (Formalized Music) is quite complex, but that book came out of his early work, and he almost always made adjustments to match the artistic idea he was trying to achieve." Sam Solomon, who will be conducting Persephassa and Okho, two of Xenakis' percussion works, says that "mathematicians often find the music not rigorous enough. If you try to trace back the notes to the math, it frequently doesn't match up. He was always actively composing within what the mathematics provided."

Xenakis wrote a wide variety of works in many media. A varied cross-section of his instrumental chamber music will be presented Wednesday night: Dhipli Zyia, is an early folk-influence work for violin and cello. Evryali, by contrast, is a monumental examination of rhythm and virtuosity for solo piano. The evening will end with Charisma, a brief but intense requiem for French composer Jean-Pierre Guézec for clarinet and cello. These pieces will be played by Yukiko Shimazaki, piano; Sasha Callahan, violin; Leo Eguchi, cello; and Diane Heffner, clarinet.

Xenakis's methods, which did not need to privilege pitch over other elements of sound, were well suited to percussion, and the evening will also offer two very different pieces for percussion: Okho for three djembés, and Persephassa, a tour de force for six percussionists. Okho is very approachable; Solomon points out that the instrumentation, three performers playing the same kind of African drum, affords a homogeneity of sound similar to that of a string quartet. Xenakis was never afraid of pulse in his music—again, in contrast to much other music written at the same time; the effacement of pulse was a common theme in the music of mid-century. Much of Okho sticks to a pulse, finding its variety in the combination of lines among players, and in the tonal possibilities of the djembe. Persephassa could not be more different. Written for six percussionists playing a wide variety of instruments, from tympani to mouth sirens, it is a dramatic showpiece, as opposed to Okho's gentler chamber music. It requires that the six players be placed around the performing space, making intense demands on the players when the music requires close synchronization. Persephassa is an encyclopedia of percussion writing techniques, experimenting with pulse as well as with independent tempi; with extremes of dynamic; and with the architecture of the concert hall.

In addition to the spoken texts and live performances, the evening will contain excerpts of Xenakis's site-specific electronic pieces; he was a pioneer in this field, writing music to fill architectural spaces in Montreal, Osaka, Paris, and the ruins of Persepolis in Iran. He also designed light shows, coordinating the firing of flashbulbs and reflection of lasers with the music using paper tape and photoelectric cells. The piece includes be two original videos by Vicky Betsou,

assembled from pictures of Xenakis, of his site-specific performances, and of his graphical sketches for his scores, which are frequently astonishingly beautiful.

Xenakis's music is the product of the composer's intensely personal search for a new mode of expression. The results he produced are often unlike anything the casual concertgoer is prepared to hear. Iannis Xenakis In First Person aims to bring the unfamiliar listener to closer to Xenakis. Alexandros Mouzas says, "In Athens, I overheard a man talking to his friends at intermission. 'Finally, I can understand this music!' he said." There may be no better way to begin to comprehend this music, and similar music, by giving a composer a chance to disclose himself while surrounded by realizations of his work.

Xenakis in First Person will be presented this Wednesday at 8:00 p.m. at the Tsai Performance Center, 685 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston. Admission is free. Persephassa will be presented again (along with works by Jo Kondo, John Luther Adams, Joseph Celli and Lei Liang) on this Friday at a free concert by the BU Percussion Ensemble at the BU CFA Concert Hall, 855 Commonwealth Avenue.

Chapter 5

15 November 2012

Xenakis concert

Iannis Xenakis In First Person, a combination one-man monologue and concert of the work of the 20th-century Greek composer, aims to bring the audience to a closer understanding of the music by hearing the words of the composer spoken straight from the man himself, as it were. In the incarnation presented by ALEA III at the Tsai Performance Center on Wednesday night, the words were not particularly successful; but the music was, sometimes overwhelmingly so.

The focal point of the evening was Persephassa, performed by the Boston University Percussion Ensemble under the direction of Samuel Z. Solomon. It will be performed again this Friday, November 16th at 8 p.m. at the Boston University CFA Concert Hall, and it is an experience you should not miss. Written for six players, playing a battery of struck instruments, positioned around the edges of the room, it provides devastating impact as well intellectual stimulation. Despite the fact that it does away with traditional notions of melody or harmony, it is closely argued; despite the absence of traditional notions of form, it bears close attentive listening and its developmental methods are audible and inevitable. A professor of mine once said that great works "teach you how to read them", and Persephassa does it exactly this. Clocking in at a bit under a half an hour, it uses that time with great care, introducing new elements and developing previous motives. The range of instruments is dazzling – drums, symbols, gongs, tuned pieces of metal and of wood, maracas, mouth sirens – and Xenakis combines them slowly at first, and then more rapidly as the piece progresses. As a piece of spatial music, it is kin more to Gabrieli than to Henry Brant. Xenakis isn't merely playing with sound in space, he's using physical separation to create dialogue between players, or to heighten the sense of an enveloping mass. When the players play in synchronization, the effect is powerful and overwhelming. When they play in independent meters, one listens to it much as one would listen to a six-voice Bach fugue – switching between either tracking individual parts, or allowing the combination of sounds to come together in a texture. One of the most striking moments comes after the "Acme mouth sirens" (that's what they are called in the score!) have entered. They sound comical and cartoonish when they first appear; at one moment, Solomon made an upward gesture, and they all swooped in unison with

a goofy kazoo-like feeling, causing the audience to laugh out loud. But there was a point where, after some gentle noodling, there was a sudden, terrifying sound of hard sticks on tam-tams, and in that moment the sirens suddenly sounded like they were warning of an air-raid. For sheer dramatic contrast it called to mind Shostakovich; as a study in how context influences perception, it was pure Eisenstein. Embedded in a "theater piece", Persephassa provided the most theatrical experience of the night. Mr. Solomon stood on stage in a spotlight, his six players arrayed around him, appearing as a compelling focal point. His movements (or lack of them in the more independent passages) provided a visual cue to help structure one's hearing of the piece. The playing was vigorous, exciting, precise and impressive.

This was followed by Okho, a relatively late piece (1989) for three djembés played joyfully by members of the Boston Conservatory Percussion Ensemble. In contrast to Persephassa, during most of Okho the players share a common pulse, and in place of the battery of instruments in the larger piece, these players have available the not inconsiderable ranges of pitch, attack and timbre of these versatile African drums. Think of the world's most skillful and intellectual drum circle, and you get an idea of the ambience of Okho. Full of rhythmic surprises and interplay, trading of phrases and dense ensemble playing, Okho was invigorating, urgent and… charming? Why not, charming!

The evening opened and closed with duos. The early work Dhipli Ziya (1951) for violin and cello was the first piece performed. Informed by Eastern European folk music, with moments of virtuosity, this piece duo was unlike later Xenakis, being broadly tonal and structured around traditional melody and harmony (although an aggressive Bartokian harmony). It was played with passion and vitality by Sasha Callahan, violin, and Leo Eguchi, cello. One can admire the workmanship of the piece without wishing there were more like it. The final piece was Charisma, a duo for cello and clarinet. Unlike the relatively ingratiating Dhipli Ziya, Charisma is a unflinching and unsentimental commemoration of the untimely death of a friend of Xenakis of a heart attack at 37; its epigraph is from the Iliad, "then the soul like smoke moved into the earth, grinding". This evening, it stood as an expression of the pain and despair suffered by Xenakis as he slowly lost his faculties, becoming unable to work and ultimately unable to recognize his home or family. It is program music, a four-minute depiction of the sundering of soul and body, and of the soul's lost wandering. The instruments produce extreme sounds — grinding the bow on the bridge of the cello, key noises and multiphonics from the clarinet — to depict a harrowing outcry in the face of death. Think of Anton Webern by way of Francis Bacon. Clarinetist Diane Heffner joined Mr. Eguchi for a moving and convincing performance.

The theatrical concept, generated by Alexandros Mouzas and realized by Antonios Antonopoulos, alternated the music with a series of monologues taken from the writings and interviews of Xenakis. This would seem to have required some work. The second half concluded with a lengthy section of a Greek television documentary which consisted of Xenakis holding forth among galleries of Greek antiquities. To judge by this, Xenakis was drawn to sweeping generalizations about music, philosophy, history and politics. In this film, he comes dangerously close to seeming like crank, so caught up in his own ideas as to be careless about expressing them clearly (to be fair, this may be an effect of subtitle translations, which seemed extremely awkward). The assembled texts of In First Person were edited carefully and were less digressive than the documentary, but

nevertheless the monologues had a patchwork quality. Important biographical information flies by: the death of his mother when he was "five or six," his conversion and then aversion to religion are all dispatched within the space of 30 seconds. Some of the speeches give the impression of a fantastically arrogant man — it is unclear whether this is the intended effect, or just the effect of having to compress his thoughts and achievements into a brief spoken moment. I only began to feel a sense of real human connection near the end of the piece, when we heard heartbreaking fragments of letters written when he was losing his memory to ill health. Ironically, these are words written or spoken after he had stopped composing. The young actor Jake Murphy, playing Xenakis, was overmatched. I don't know how much time he was given to prepare, but it was not enough to enable him to master the text; he appeared to be working from the script. He was amplified, which drained color from his voice and was unflattering to his often dry delivery. The set, which in the original Athens production was a small but evocative realization of Xenakis' study, was here a simple table with a black fabric skirt and a water pitcher. It evoked a sales meeting in a hotel conference room rather than the workplace of a groundbreaking composer. The cumulative effect of these choices was to distance Xenakis, to turn these statements (whether intellectual or emotional) into a rather dry lecture rather than an appeal to a human audience.

The overtly theatrical gestures were mixed in their effect. Pianist Yukiko Shimazaki was required to play the fearsome Evralyi while the score was projected above her. The score emphasizes the vicious demands Xenakis is making — there are stretches where Xenakis notates this relentless piece, made of mostly of masses of sixteenth notes, spread across five staves, as if this was the only way to make it look as hard as possible. Shimazaki seemed to play those notes in place and more or less in rhythm, but the performance lacked spark. Perhaps the fact that we could all see what she was supposed to be playing inhibited the sense of risk taking that the cruelly complex score would seem to encourage.

Videos by Vicky Betsou that accompanied excerpts of Xenakis' electroacoustic works were very attractive, affording the audience a chance to see the graphical work that preceded the rendering of some of Xenakis's orchestral pieces into conventional notation. But the brief excerpting reduced the pieces themselves to abstract chunks of sound without impact. The video's images of young people huddled in sleeping bags under laser lights at the baths of Cluny gave one only a tourist's idea of what a mind-blowing experience the Polytopes de Cluny might have been.

Despite the show's weaknesses I stepped out into the cool night air invigorated and stimulated. Congratulations to ALEA III, and I can only ask for more challenges of this sort in the future.

Chapter 6

16 November 2012

Conrad Susa's opera Transformations is being presented at the Boston Conservatory Theater this weekend. Written for eight singers and eight instrumentalists, Transformations sets most of Anne Sexton's book of poetry by the same name, retelling tales from the Brothers Grimm. The poems retain the outlines of the familiar stories — Snow White, Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, etc. — but contain unexpected cruelties, sexual confusions and disturbances, and an obsession with death.

Having encountered the poems first, they seem unlikely texts for an opera. The stories are told in the third person. The language is complex, demanding close reading. The imagery is startling yet the style cool. Susa has set the text as Sexton wrote it, and mostly succeeds in writing vocal lines and orchestral parts that preserve the words, at the cost, though, of making much of the music merely pleasing rather than memorable. A pastiche of American popular styles combined with operatic voice production, the piece occupies an unusual place between traditional opera and musical theater. There are few significant set pieces, notably a monologue for Sexton herself. Otherwise the stories are told by the ensemble, in an unbroken line of spoken recitative. This is not at all grand opera; but likewise, it poses challenges that make Sondheim's Into the Woods seem juvenile.

Conductor Andrew Altenbach guided the singers and players effectively through the varied demands. The un-amplified sound of the players in the pit as well as the singers on stage projected well in the dry but clear confines of the Boston Conservatory Theater. Yet, the amplified monologue of Sexton, performed in a more crooning pop style by Christina Pecce had more immediacy in the space.

The cast I saw Thursday night tackled the challenge of the piece with aplomb (there are two casts; this cast will perform again on Saturday). Catherine Malfitano, who made her breakthrough in role of No. 2 (Anne Sexton) in the premiere production at the Minnesota Opera 1972, acted as artistic advisor. Christina Pecce, in that role, gave perhaps the most polished and engaged performance of the evening.

The set by Julia Noulin-Mérat and lighting by Carl Weimann were simple but ingenious. Most of the opera took place in a wood, the stage covered with leaves, with only a picnic table

and some institutional chairs as props. Sonotubes plastered with newspaper gave the impression of birches, but they were themselves transformed to make Rapunzel's castle, or to make the diminutive scale of Rumplestiltskin concrete. At the end of the acts there was an indication that the play was taking place in a mental institution (a common setting for productions of Transformations), but this was perfunctory. The direction by Nathan Troup emphasized the physicality of the actors, whose bodies were responsible for shaping the space, and whose movements and postures illuminated the texts that were being sung. The singers attacked the challenges of the piece with bravery and confidence, and the acting and the singing were both excellent.

Danielle Lozano and the ensemble (Max Wagenblass photo)

While the texts were surprisingly clear, they were not universally so, and several moments in the opera were blunted when the texts could not be made out. The stage pictures during the "White Snake" were striking, but their purpose obscure; the lesbian embraces that began the "Rapunzel" section are accompanied by wordless singing that obliterates the crucial texts that explain the nature of the relationship. Sexton's language favors unusual imagery and language that is sarcastic or lacerating, replete with anachronistic, ironic similes; in this production, too often these moments were played for laughs, which risked turning the poetry into clowning. The audience seemed to enjoy the amusement, but the comedy undercut the devastating twists that arrive at the end of each story, and blunted the revelation that ends the piece.

Chapter 7

26 November 2012

The St. Lawrence String Quartet brought vivid interpretive imagination to pieces by Haydn, Golijov and Beethoven Sunday afternoon at the Concord Academy Performing Arts Center as part of the Concord Chamber Music series. The quartet has been playing for twenty years; its current personnel are Geoff Nuttall and Scott St. John, violins; Lesley Robertson, viola; and Christopher Costanza, cello.

One of my most memorable concert experiences was hearing the St. Lawrence play in New York several years back, when they also includeed a piece of Golijov's, The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind. I was struck by the force of the players' collective personality and dynamism. I was eagerly anticipating seeing them again this weekend, and they did not disappoint. This is what live classical performance should be — a display of passion, conviction and intelligence. It was also interesting. The program opened with Haydn's Op. 76, No. 2, which carries the subtitle "Fifths". The Op. 76 quartets are among Haydn's last works, written after the composer had escaped the provincial Esterhazy court and become a prominent figure in London and Vienna. The piece is astonishingly inventive — the first movement uses its simple initial material (a pair of descending fifths in D minor) to create an unorthodox sonata form that is both closely argued and filled with almost perverse variety. All of the movements share a tendency to surprise; there are sudden outbursts in the second movement's theme and variations, and the fourth movement decides nearly at the last minute to finish in D major. The third movement's scherzo is a two-voice strict canon (!).

The St. Lawrence violinists alternate playing the first and second parts; Nuttall took the lead in the Haydn; St. John played first in the other two pieces. Nuttall is the most physically demonstrative member of the quartet, and he made excellent use of both his playing and his movement to bring to life each twist and turn of the score. His feet left the floor with regularity, as his center of gravity moved in sympathy with the shifts of mood and texture (as he chose to wear red shoes, with red plaid socks, making his feet unavoidable, I have to interpret his footwork as an integral part of his performance; I thought he did an excellent job). The foursome did not shy away from strong choices: repeated passages of double-stopped quarter notes in the trio got a little heavier

and draggier and grittier each time we encountered them, as if the sheer sonic weight of those sounds were so enjoyable to conjure that it was worth wallowing in them a little; the final figure in the fourth movement had a "snap" glissando put into it which smacked just a little of Texas competition fiddling. Mr. Nuttall made a virtue of variety in dynamic, attack, phrasing and tone, opting for a particularly aggressive sound in the outer movements, but finding a rich, roundness to start the second. There were other choices I wasn't so sure about — the minuet went so quickly that the oddness of the canon was elided, for example — but even those choices were interesting.

Osvaldo Golijov should be is familiar to readers of this publication. Having lived in the area for some time, he is currently teaching at Holy Cross, and has been the subject of no little attention in the last decade with recordings on Deutsche Grammophon and Nonesuch. His music frequently combines Jewish themes (both musical and extra-musical) with a primarily tonal language that draws from musics of many cultures. The composer was present, and gave a brief but entertaining introduction to the second piece on the program, his Qoholet, Hebrew for Ecclesiastes. Golijov called nameless author "the Jerusalem Thoreau — but a little less optimistic." The piece is in two movements, ostensibly about "what stays, and what changes." The first gives the first violin an aria of sorts to play against a motoric rhythmic accompaniment; the second is a meditation that the composer likened to the flowing water of a river, with tone-painting in tremolos, sustained notes and antiphonic pulsing that successfully conveyed its aquatic imagery without becoming intrusive. The piece was attractive enough, but did not make a strong impression. The excellent program notes by Steven Ledbetter state that "there was talk of a three-movement work, but as it stands now, it contains two movements"; it does sound as if it is awaiting further development.

After intermission the Quartet played Beethoven's first Razumovsky quartet, Op. 59, No. 1. While as full of surprises as the Haydn, it is certainly a structurally more ambitious piece, and the interpretation was suitably different, emphasizing the architecture of the first and third movements especially, while not losing any detail of dynamic or attack. St. John's leadership was more nuanced, perhaps a little less risky (he wears black shoes). The Adagio of the Beethoven was a respite. In a program filled with tension and intensity, I found myself needing the moments of repose afforded here. This was monumental Beethoven, impressively scaled.

The quartet offered an encore after the Beethoven, the Scherzo from Dvořák's Op. 105. It was an excellent summary of the afternoon the rhythmic opening sharp and opinionated, the trio a moment of repose — that is, until that moment where the lines are suddenly independent, a moment I had not really noticed before, but which here was an exciting and unexpected moment of controlled chaos.

There are certainly some compromises made by the St. Lawrence to afford their kind of interpretive freedom. The sound can occasionally be harsh, and there were moments where pitch was a little uncertain. The acoustics of the Concord Performing Arts Center did not do the Quartet a lot of favors in this regard. It is small enough that no notes were lost and projection was not an issue, but the sound is unreverberant and upper harmonics almost non-existent, giving very little cushion to the sound. But for me, these are quibbles. I crave the enthusiasm and engagement the St. Lawrence provides. You can argue over this music.

Backmatter here This is a test.

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