

wednesdays@7

Aleck Karis

January 26, 2011

7 pm

Conrad Prebys Music Center

UC San Diego Department of Music

ALECK KARIS

January 26, 2011

L'Aloette Calandrelle (book V, Catalogue of Birds (1956-58))

Olivier Messiaen

Intermittences (2005)

Elliott Carter

La Bouscarle (book V)

Olivier Messiaen

Caténaires (2006)

Elliott Carter

Le Traquet Stapazin (book II)

Olivier Messiaen

intermission

3 Nouvelles Études (1839)

Frédéric Chopin

Études, Opus 25 (1832-36)

Frédéric Chopin

Messiaen and Carter, both born in 1908, have strongly contrasting styles, especially in the case of the works presented here, written a half-century apart. The Messiaen pieces are highly specific, in place and time. Each movement comes from a bird-watching trip to a different region of France, during which Messiaen took musical dictation from the birds he encountered. In addition to dozens of different bird songs (and insect sounds), these pieces evoke the visual surroundings, such as a bird in flight, terraced vineyards, the sunrise, or the calm flow of a river.

Messiaen meticulously labels each bird in the score, along with his evocations of the landscape. The following are paraphrases of his notes.

L'Aloette Calandrelle: Provence, 2 o'clock in the afternoon: **The short-toed Lark.** The Alpilles mountains, dry rocks, broom and cypress. Percussive monotone of cicadas, staccato alarm of the kestrel. Two-voice counterpoint of crested and short-toed larks. 4pm: the desert of Crau, intense light, torrid heat (opening chords). Only the short phrase of the short-toed lark fills the silence. Towards 6 in the evening, a skylark flies up into the sky with a jubilant strophe. Memory of the short-toed lark....

La Bouscarle: Last days of April. Saint-Brice, (near Cognac). The banks of the Charente river and its little tributary, the Charenton. The green water reflects the willows and poplars. Suddenly a brilliant voice bursts out with violence: it's the **Cetti's Warbler**, furious and invisible. A moorhen chatters. A blue-green arrow shimmers on the flat water: a kingfisher passes with several sharp cries, coloring the countryside [rapid upward-sweeping chords]. The river is calm [slow moving chords]. The blackbird whistles; the song thrush with its rhythmic incantations joins the pearly cascades of the robin. Tremolos from the little wren, clear and fluty refrain from the blackcap, 3-note refrain from the hoopoe, and the haloed, lunar, far-away notes of the nightingale, like a blend of harpsichord and gong. What is that strange scythe-like scraping? It's the corncrake repeating its iambic rhythm in the high grass...here again the victorious strophe of the chaffinch and the shrill rustling of the sand martin. The yellow wagtail walks elegantly along the water, with its dusty blue head and yellow breast like a golden button. Nuptial flight of the kingfisher, exposing in the sun his beautiful colors of forget-me-not, sapphire and emerald. Silence.....brutal punctuation of the morning, the Cetti's Warbler burst out one last time!

Le Traquet Stapazin: End of June. Le Roussillon, the Côte vermeille, south of Banyuls [near the Spanish border]. Rocky cliffs, mountains, the sea, terraced vineyards [opening chords]. By the road, a **black-eared wheatear**. [rapid 8-note call, 3+5] Proud, noble, he stands on the rocks in his handsome suit of orange silk and black velvet, a reverse black T sharing the white of his tail, a black mask covering cheeks, throat and above the eyes. One could say he's like a great Spanish lord attending a masked ball. His call is strong, short, and brusque. Not far, in the vines, an ortolan bunting lets out its ecstatic fluted repeated notes, a melancholic

ending.....Here is “La Garrigue”: a jumble of low plants, succulents, gorse, rosemary....the exquisite and invisible song of the spectacled warbler. Flying high and far over the sea, the cruel, mocking shriek of the herring gull, dry and percussive.

5 o'clock in the morning. The red disc of the sun rises out of the sea and into the sky. [slow chords, crescendo]. Its golden crown augments, till it is entirely golden yellow. A luminous band forms above the sea. 9 o'clock. New voices: the 2-note fluted call of the orphean warbler, the crystalline cassations of the corn bunting, the slightly deranged gaiety of the rock bunting, volubility of the melodious warbler – singing in flight, exultant, its chirping mixed with the sharp cries of the Thekla lark. Several black-eared wheatears call to each other.

9 o'clock in the evening. Surrounded by blood and gold, the sun sets behind the mountains [slow chords, diminuendo]. The sky passes from red to orange, finally filling with a dream-like violet. Last stanzas of the spectacled warbler, three notes from the Ortolan bunting in the night-covered vines. Again the black-eared wheatear, far away down the road. Dry percussion from the herring gull, very far off, over the black sea. Silence...10 o'clock at night, total darkness. Memory of the spectacled warbler...

Carter's two brief works are products of his imagination and have no programmatic intent. *Intermittences* (title from Proust) explores “the many meanings silences can express in musical discourse”. The mercurial expression and rich pianistic invention in this piece bring to mind Carter's more expansive 1980 masterwork, *Night Fantasies*. The etude *Caténaires* is, in the words of the composer, “a fast one line piece with no chords...a continuous chain of notes using different spacings, accents, and colorings, to produce a wide variety of expression.” A catenary is the mathematical term for the shape formed by a chain or rope hanging freely from two fixed points. The chain of notes in *Caténaires* evokes this shape frequently and sometimes quite explicitly.

It seemed to me that it would be good to have a little space between Messiaen's bird-watching selections from Provence, the mid-Atlantic coast, and the Mediterranean coast. Carter's use of silence in *Intermittences* is intriguingly different from Messiaen's in *L'Alouette Calandrelle*, and *Caténaires* can be thought of as a high-speed train ride from the mid-Atlantic coast down to the Spanish border.

In the three “new Etudes” written on commission for a book of studies by Moscheles, Chopin is determined to avoid the flash of the Lisztian “etude of virtuosity”. These are etudes of subtlety and lyricism, moderate in their tempos and dynamics.

1. f minor. Andantino. Entirely 3 against 4, very long sinuous line.

2. A flat major. Allegretto. 3 against 2, right hand triplets of three-note chords with independent voices.

3. D flat major. Allegretto. A waltz with both legato and staccato lines in the right hand.

Chopin's twelve Opus 25 Etudes are ambitious studies of compositional craft, by contrast to the earlier Opus 10 etudes, which are more vehicles for the virtuoso. Though more often played singly or in small groups, they were clearly conceived as a set, with clear connections between movements and a convincing expressive arc. These works are unsurpassed in their harmonic and melodic innovation, and imaginative creation of new textures and colors on the piano.

1. A flat major, Allegro sostenuto. Called "Aeolian Harp" by Robert Schumann.

2. f minor, Presto. An arabesque-filled chain, 6 notes in the right hand to 3 in the left.

3. F major. Allegro. Galloping short-short-long rhythm, complex texture with two crossing voices in each hand

4. a minor. Agitato. Staccato off-beat chords with emerging melody

5. e minor. Vivace. Scherzando outer sections, lyrical tenor middle section.

6. g sharp minor. Allegro. Study in thirds.

7. c sharp minor. Lento. A nocturne, known as the "cello" etude for its expressive left hand, actually a duet with soprano.

8. D flat major. Vivace. Study in sixths.

9. G flat major. Allegro assai. "Butterfly" etude. The nickname has nothing to do with the music, a quick, light dance in 2/4, but describes the fluttering movement required of the open right hand in execution.

10. b minor. Allegro con fuoco. Octaves. The heaviest etude (following the lightest). The harmonies are 'demonic' and startling even today, Consoling middle section, also in octaves.

11. a minor. Allegro con brio. Known as "Winter wind": a good title, but as with all the others, not Chopin's. The composer wisely avoided specificity in naming his compositions, respecting the imagination of each individual listener.

12. c minor. "Ocean" - again not the composer's title. It does have an elemental power, but like Opus 10, no. 1, it also evokes Bach.

ALECK KARIS

For over thirty years, Aleck Karis has been one of the leading pianists in the New York contemporary music scene. He has performed and recorded with many of the city's new music groups and was called on by the New York Philharmonic for its Horizons Festival as well as the return concert of Pierre Boulez. He has been the pianist for Speculum Musicae since 1982 and has performed with that group all over the US and at the Bath, Warsaw Autumn, Geneva "Made in America" festivals and Venice Biennale. He has simultaneously pursued a parallel career as a soloist with orchestra and in recital, performing concertos by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Franck, Ravel, Carter and Hyla. Last season he played Stravinsky's *Concerto for Piano and Winds* with the Columbus Symphony and performed Messiaen's *Trois Petites Liturgies* with the New York City Opera Orchestra under George Manahan at the newly refurbished Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center.

Karis has participated in dozens of premieres and has been a persuasive advocate for numerous composers, many at the beginning of their careers. He has had an abiding and passionate commitment to the music of Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, John Cage and Harrison Birtwistle. He was the first non-dedicattee to record Carter's *Night Fantasies*, which he has performed around the world, and has played virtually all of Carter's ensemble music with piano. He has recorded Davidovsky's *Synchronisms No 6* twice, and recently recorded his *Duo Capriccioso* with Curt Macomber. His disc of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano has received broad acclaim. He has presented Birtwistle's massive "Harrison's Clocks" many times, as well as the chamber concerto *Slow Frieze* with Speculum Musicae, and *The Axe Manual* for piano and percussion.

Karis' discography includes music by Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Stravinsky, Carter, Cage, Glass, Babbitt, Martino, Anderson, Liang and Feldman, on Bridge, Nonesuch, Tzadic, New World, Neuma, Mode, Centaur and CRI Records. His most recent disc, of late piano music of Frédéric Chopin, was released on Roméo Records in 2009.

Karis studied with Charles Wuorinen at the Manhattan School of Music, where he won the Sherman Ewing Composition prize. During his four years at MSM he studied piano privately with Artur Balsam. He worked for two years at Juilliard with Beveridge Webster, receiving a Master's in 1978. His chief piano mentor has been the brilliant Brazilian-American teacher William Daghlian.

Karis is a professor of music at the University of California, San Diego.

