

palimpsest

november 17, 2010

7 pm

conrad prebys music center

palimpsest

november 17, 2010

conducted by rand steiger

A Fuoco

Luca Francesconi

Pablo Gomez, guitar soloist
Christine Tivolacci, flute
Curt Miller, clarinet
Dustin Donahue, percussion
Brendan Nyugen, piano
Batya MacAdam-Somer, violin
Ashley Walters, cello

Hrim

Anna Thorvaldsdottir

Berglind Maria Tomasdottir, flute
Sarah Skuster, oboe/English horn/oboe d'more
Ariana Lamon-Anderson, clarinet
Curt Miller, bass clarinet
Nicolee Kuester, horn
Ian Carroll, trombone
William Fried, keyboard (piano/celeste)
Batya Macadam-Somer, violin
Sara Ballance, violin
Travis Maril, viola
Ashley Walters, cello
Scott Worthington, bass



Transcriptions on listening to time

Aaron Helgeson

Berglind Maria Tomasdottir, flute
Sarah Skuster, oboe/English horn/oboe d'amore
Ariana Lamon-Anderson, clarinet
Curt Miller, bass clarinet
Nicolee Kuester, horn
Ian Carroll, trombone
Brendan Nguyen, keyboard (piano/celeste)
Batya MacAdam-Somer, violin
Sara Ballance, violin
Travis Maril, viola
Ashley Walters, cello
Scott Worthington, bass
Stephen Solook, percussion

Kammerkonzert for 13 instrumentalists

Gyorgy Ligeti

Berglind Maria Tomasdottir, flute
Sarah Skuster, oboe/English horn/oboe d'amore
Ariana Lamon-Anderson, clarinet
Curt Miller, bass clarinet
Nicolee Kuester, horn
Ian Carroll, trombone
Katalin Lukacs, keyboard 1 (organ/harpsichord)
William Fried, keyboard 2 (piano/celeste)
Batya MacAdam-Somer, violin
Sara Ballance, violin
Travis Maril, viola
Ashley Walters, cello
Scott Worthington, bass



On Landscapes and Inevitability

By the time György Ligeti penned his *Chamber Concerto* (1969-1970), nearly a decade had passed since his large orchestral works *Apparitions* and *Atmosphères* had secured him international recognition as a composer. Ligeti's focus on sonorous richness in these works placed him distinctly apart from the prevailing ideologies of serial music that had sprung up in Germany and spread throughout Europe in the wake of World War II. In fact, this is how we often remember him today – as the fellow who did something different, and in so doing, “freed” music from the bounds of intellectual constraints. Several generations of composers later, it is more or less common practice to consider sound as something to experience, to explore, to enjoy, not a substance to control and manipulate. Our debt of gratitude to Ligeti is not for calling into question the mechanized values of the serial mindset, but rather for reminding us to listen.

Luca Francesconi's *A Fuoco*, for solo guitar and ensemble, offers a compelling opportunity for us as listeners to follow Ligeti's lead. Francesconi's use of textural variety as one of the primary experiential trajectories of the work leads to an abundance of lush sonorities. If we take a step back and view the piece as a kind of landscape, the composer's diverse and engaging palette of sonic potential frames the work's gradual accumulation of energy and momentum in ways that are direct and palpable – a mountain in the middle of the terrain. As with any landscape, the beauty of this sonic environment is in a constant shifting of focus between discovering the richness of detail and marveling at the splendor of the whole.

The work's transformation of content, moving from the sustained, timbre-centric sounds of the opening to the rhythmically-agitated pitch constructs which come to full force around the two-thirds marker and beyond, also suggests a certain inevitability inherent in the piece's structure, as does the ultimate return to the opening material. It is easy to pinpoint the inevitability of a musical moment when we view a work in retrospect—the knowledge that such and such a moment simply *had* to occur how and when it did—but the magic of an inevitable *experience* occurs in real time. Whether one's appreciation of “the inevitable” stems from the normalized memory of a vast array of socio-historical precedents or something more subjective like musical taste, the trigger lies in a work's ability to provide experiential clues and the listener's ability to retain these as memory.

In *A Fuoco*, which is subtitled “Fourth Study on Memory,” the advent of concerted, virtuosic materials is heralded not only by the gradual development of gestural materials from the nebulous opening (which “point to the mountain,” so to speak) but also in the degree to which these stand out from the surrounding landscape as rocks or hills. Pablo Gomez Cano, tonight's soloist, views the piece as “a sophisticated theme with variations, very Italian in style, including the search for *virtuosissimo* in the Paganini tradition.” Each subsequent variation is a step taken toward the mountain, toward *virtuosissimo*, with increasing amounts of more rigorous activity pointing us toward the distant peak. At last we arrive, but we've *seen* it all along. In this light, the work's title takes on a special richness of meaning: the Italian might refer to fire, a traditional analogy for performative virtuosity, or to visual focus, the crystallization of images within an otherwise indistinct field. The mountain of *A Fuoco* both rises successively from a plain of established material and solidifies from blurred memories, the once-disparate instrumental forces momentarily coalescing into a new sonic whole before dissipating back into the mist.

The first movement of Ligeti's *Kammerkonzert (Corrente)* begins with a concentrated polyphonic texture that favors static or only gradually changing harmonies over conventional pitch trajectories. Ligeti often used this technique in the years following its initial appearance in *Atmosphères*, referring to the practice as "micropolyphony" and to the resultant texture as a "cloud" of sonorous activity. Listening to Ligeti's clouds, it is easy to become lost in the swirling details of minute gestures and shifting instrumental color, with moments of greater density or amplitude forming momentary swells in the experiential landscape, yet in reality the continuously morphing texture forms a coherent progression not unlike Francesconi's. The terrain is characterized by other shapes as well: single sustained tones stand apart from the surrounding field of activity, eventually becoming instigators of gestural contours in their own right – subtle hints that larger forces are at work behind the immediate surface of the piece. The inevitability of the sustained chords that follow the micropolyphony and the subsequent dynamic interchanges between these two "opposing" characters is rooted in their foreshadowing within the prolonged opening trajectory. The movement ends with unresolved conflict.

Similar inevitabilities characterize *Hrím*, about which composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir writes:

The piece is inspired by the notion of dispersion, represented as release and echoing in the sense that single elements in the music are released and spread through the ensemble in various ways throughout the process of the piece. The idea applies to the minute components in the piece, represented in each pitch through timbre and harmony, as well as on a larger scale in the form of the piece. The overall shape of the work bares the design of the reverberation from beginning to the end. ... The Icelandic title refers to the gradual formation of frost crystals.

The organic quality and traceable diffusion of materials in *Hrím* foster a listening experience rich in resonant memory, and—while the energy and continuity of these trajectories often suggest a sense of motion—the predominant sensation of the work has much to do with the timelessness of this resonance, in which we might move back and forth between relating moments one to another and simply being swept up in the intricacies of the instrumental writing. The discoveries of listening are largely defined by our investment in the details of the landscape and their immediate reverberations across the sonic field of the ensemble, as opposed to comprehending the ways in which they "stack up" over the span of a lengthy unfolding of musical activity (as with Francesconi). This enticement to invest in the moment might even distance us from the larger geographical features looming on the work's horizon, as though traversing a frozen landscape looking only to the ground at our feet.

If we fall for this, our experience might prove to be wondrously disorienting at those moments when the dynamic stasis of the work gives way, sometimes quite suddenly, to larger structural shifts – as though the ground we were so intent upon crossing one step at a time suddenly rose to an unexpected peak or opened into a yawning crevasse. It is not that the material for these moments is radically different from the surrounding terrain, rather that the compelling richness of the

work's minutia—normally comprised of independent iterations—momentarily forms a concerted whole, consequently leaving us subject to the perception of time. Ultimately, the work's strikingly dramatic qualities might be experienced not as a range of activity between coalescence and independence, but rather a range of tangibility in our perception of time over timelessness: the true surprise is becoming conscious of the fact that we are engaged with an art form that flows through time, despite any longing on our part to remain in the richness of the moment. This proves to be an attractive reality, however, and points us toward the larger beauty of the work as a whole.

Much of Ligeti's *Kammerkonzert* shares this dynamic interplay between the perceptions of time and timelessness. The second movement (*Calmo, Sostenuto*), which inherits the unresolved drama of the first movement's ending, similarly moves between sustained clusters and polyphonic textures contrived of more active, quasi-gestural materials. Many of these sonorities appear timeless, without trajectory, individual landscapes of tone and color within the larger framework of the movement. When such pockets of activity eventually take on a more conventionally dramatic function, propelling the music through a series of gestures and overt harmonic changes toward an eventual "resolution," is it inevitable? The potential has been there all along, but perhaps we were too caught up in the beauty of the moment to realize what was transpiring before it was suddenly upon us.

The landscape of *Kammerkonzert* changes somewhat drastically with the third movement (*Movimento Preciso E Meccanico*). Even though Ligeti's predilection for gradual transformations shines through just as in the first two movements, the means of voicing these trajectories has changed from swirling polyphony and sustained sonorities to rapidly repeating articulations of single pitches or chords. Fluctuations of timbre and instrumental density still offer tangible contours of energy, sometimes forming momentary gestures, but the primary dynamic component here is Ligeti's subtle use of differentiation between rates of repetition, which, when stacked in simultaneous layers, act as an array of mechanical clocks all slightly out of sync with one another.

Often the sensation of time serves as an important component in the formation of "the inevitable moment." We must be conscious of time's passing leading up to the inevitable—which in music might range from a traceable flowing of materials to a simple sonic articulation of chronological time, such as a repeated ticking—in order to grasp the full resonance of such a moment. The inevitability of Ligeti's mechanical time is that it winds down and eventually comes to a stop.

About *Transcriptions on listening to time*, composer Aaron Helgeson writes:

In 2003, while working as a music librarian, I encountered several field recordings of massive European clock chimes and mechanical orchestras from the early twentieth century, published under the title Musica Mechanica. ... The field recordings presented in Musica Mechanica are peculiar in that they attempt to preserve not only the musical renditions of these automata, but the sounds of the machines themselves. Each track begins with the whirs and chirps of the machine as it starts up, and ends with the thumps and buzzes of its winding down. The music exists in between these moments, emanating from somewhere within an enormous mechanical chamber that hums and

vibrates sympathetically along with the melodic fragments.

Transcriptions on listening to time *began life as orchestral transcriptions of several of the recordings included in Musica Mechanica, the aim of which was to capture the dual nature of time (as both the measurement of our passing internal experience and as a marker of broader historical moments). Originally intended simply as a set of stand-alone miniatures, the music itself became a kind of clockwork. Sections of the work are repeated ad libitum, each time with certain material omitted by the conductor, spinning out into an infinite combination of musical moments that potentially approach the horizon of eternity.*

Each of the fragmented transcriptions in Helgeson's work is rich in the resonant memory of its former existence, yet—invariably—the transformations of the successive processes of listening, composing, listening, performing, and more listening have a profound impact on the music's potential for continuity – that is, an important component of our perception of time. Materials that began as complete renderings of single ideas are reconstituted as moments and here cast as an array of geographical features across the landscape of the work, each an opportunity for engagement and discovery, and one made all the more enticing by the delightful labyrinth of the work's open structure and flirtation with infinity.

Perhaps the four movements of Ligeti's *Kammerkonzert* hold out a similar opportunity to stop and consider (and potentially be lost in) individual geographical features as we traverse the terrain of the piece as a whole. At the same time, our enjoyment of the full resonance of this landscape stems from focusing alternately on the minutia of detail as well as the graceful sweep of the work's elegant structure. This forms a lasting impression, with Ligeti's exhortation to listen not only shaping the nature of his own music but also defining, however indirectly, many of the qualities we might discover in the more recent works on tonight's program. The last movement of *Kammerkonzert (Presto)* presents a final coalescence of Ligeti's diverse musical materials in its continuity of gestural content and accessible structural patterns, yet even here much of the music's strength lies in the richness of sonorous texture. This encapsulates the disparate qualities of the preceding movements, forming a unified whole that points—with a final, brief nod—to the inevitable works on the horizon, those of a future time: our own.

Daniel Tacke—a composer, pianist, and liturgical organist—is a candidate for the Ph.D. in Music at the University of California, San Diego.

Where local meets global.
Where smart meets thoughtful.



Where News Matters



LISTEN



WATCH



PARTICIPATE

KPBS-TV 15.1 / Cable: 11 / 711 HD
89.5 FM / 89.1 FM (La Jolla) • KQVO 97.7 FM (Imperial Valley)
kpbs.org

KPBS is a public service of San Diego State University.