

02.01.2012

palimpsest

ucsd department of music
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WEDNESDAYS@7
Winter/Spring 2012

February 15
An Evening with Chaya Czernowin
Works by renowned composer,
Harvard faculty and UCSD music alumnus

April 11
Sitar Master Kartik Seshadri

April 25
Soprano Susan Narucki
with baritone Philip Larson
and pianist Aleck Karis

May 16
Flutist Nicole Mitchell
The Art of Improvisation

May 30, June 1-2
Chamber Opera
Viktor Ullman's The Kaiser of Atlantis



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February 1, 2012, 7 PM

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Palimpsest

Conducted by Steven Schick

Bone Alphabet (1992)

Bryan Ferneyhough

Steven Schick, solo percussion

through drifting moons (2012)

Chen-Hui Jen

First performance

Verge (2009)

Lei Liang

intermission

Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta (1937)

Béla Bartók

Violin

Batya MacAdam-Somer

Kathryn Hatmaker

Pei-Chun Tsai

Wes Precourt

Igor Pandurski

Yumi Cho

Joe Hintz

Victoria Bietz

Contrabass

Scott Worthington

Adam Goodwin

Celesta

Kyle Blair (Bartók only)

Piano

Stephen Lewis (Bartók only)

Viola

Travis Maril

Gareth Zehngut

Linda Piatt

Michael Molnau

Timpani

Stephen Solook (Bartók only)

Xylophone

Ayaka Ozaki (Bartók only)

Cello

Ashley Walters

Jennifer Bewerse

Alex Greenbaum

Eric Moore

Percussion

Louise Devenish (Bartók only)

Harp

Tasha Smith (Bartók only)

Bone Alphabet (1992)

Brian Ferneyhough (b. 1943)

Written during Ferneyhough's tenure at UC San Diego at the request of and dedicated to Steven Schick, *Bone Alphabet* has gone on to become a staple of the percussion soloist's repertoire. One of the hallmarks of the piece is that it presents both the performer and listener with a number of puzzles unraveled during its learning, performing, and listening. To begin with, its instrumentation is left unspecified, with the caveat that the percussion set-up include seven instruments arranged from high to low, each being from a different instrumental family than its neighbors. This comes in response to Schick's request for a piece whose instrumentation could fit into a single suitcase, allowing the performer to craft their own percussion assemblage that is pared down ("bare-bones," perhaps hinting at the work's title). Another puzzle presented by *Bone Alphabet* is its myriad use of polyrhythms (rhythmic figures that require the performer to simultaneously perform two or more subdivisions of the beat). The complex task of performing polyrhythms is typically made simpler by "feeling" the two rhythms in a smaller common subdivision. For example, in the traditional two-against-three of the hemiola, one need only feel the two rhythms against the "common denominator" of six subdivisions. However, far beyond the simplicity of the hemiola, Ferneyhough's rhythmic canvas in *Bone Alphabet* is constructed of polyrhythms whose common subdivisions are infinitesimally small -- as in the second measure, which utilizes beat subdivisions of three, four, six, and seven -- and would require the performer to calibrate their internal clock to the thousandth of a second. In his 1994 essay on learning *Bone Alphabet*, Schick explains how he approached this virtually impossible task by translating time into physical space using the height, position, and speed of his own arms (rather than those of the clock) to calculate the precise duration of Ferneyhough's rhythms. The result? A forest of interlocking yet highly unpredictable rhythms made manifest in the exhilarating dance of the percussionist's mallets, torso, and limbs. This image conjures another possible reference from which the piece derives its title, one that is a familiar sight to patrons of UC San Diego's Geisel Library. On the walls of the hallway leading to the wing of the library that once housed the music collection is a collection of illustrations depicting the skeletons of birds in various stages of flight, a veritable "bone alphabet" of the avian gestural repertoire. Were these images present in Ferneyhough's consciousness while writing *Bone Alphabet*? Without any written evidence of the title's origin, we are left to speculate. At the very least, it is an uncanny coincidence.

-- Aaron Helgeson

...through drifting moons (2011)

for string ensemble

Chen-Hui Jen (b. 1981)

The string ensemble is set into two groups, joining the same or a similar spectral field, coloring and responding to each other. When sketching this work, I was inspired by Yang Mu's poem, *from the bell resonance in a village*. Therefore I combined the spectra of an F# tubular bell and a Tibetan singing bowl as the primary spectral field throughout the piece. The bell's color reflects the inner voices of our mind, and the "moons" in the title symbolize time that passes as a dream-like stream. Everything is drifting: lights, shadows, sounds, thoughts, dreams, and life.

-- *Chen-Hui Jen*

Verge (2011)

Lei Liang (b. 1972)

This piece was composed on the verge of an exciting moment in my life: the birth of our son Albert Shin Liang. Albert's musical name – A, B (Bb), E, D (re) – asserts itself in different configurations and disguises as basic harmonic and melodic material. His heartbeat also makes an appearance in the form of changing tempi and pulsations. In a sense, I composed the piece in order to make a musical amulet for Albert.

On a technical level, I was fascinated by the dialectical relationship between the convergence and divergence of musical voices found in the traditional heterophonic music of Mongolia. There, the functionality of a principal line and its accompaniment can interchange, and often not synchronously.

The 18 strings are divided into antiphonal groups: left versus right, front versus rear. They diverge into various sub-ensembles, quartets, and also appear as 18 virtuosic soloists. Near the end, they converge into a singular voice.

Verge was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and its Music Director, Alan Gilbert. It was premiered on December 17th, 2009 in Symphony Space at the inaugural concert of the Philharmonic's new music series CONTACT!, conducted by Magnus Lindberg.

-- *Lei Liang*

Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta (1936)

Belá Bartók (1881-1945)

Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta was commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the Basel Chamber Orchestra by Paul Sacher, whom Bartók had met in 1929 at performances of the International Society of Music. Although it is now widely considered a masterpiece, the work's instrumentation has remained fairly unique in 20th-century repertoire. The strings (including the usual harp) are divided in two antiphonal groups on either side of the stage. In the center, Bartók places percussion including snare and bass drums, cymbals, tam-tam, timpani, xylophone, and two keyboard instruments. While Bartók's prior interest in the modal tonalities of Hungarian folk music are absent in all but the fourth movement, vestiges remain in the presence of tonic pitch centers (frequently the note A) and Bartók's use of the celesta, a folk instrument whose keyboard is used to strike glockenspiel-like bells (rather than the wound strings of the piano). While the uniqueness of the ensemble certainly transcends its novelty (exploited frequently by Hollywood since the 1950's), it was the music's formal and motivic ingenuity that captured audiences of the time.

The first movement's string-dominated texture presents us with a highly chromatic atonal fugue marked by a large-scale formal crescendo and decrescendo. The fugue's understated subject, appearing initially in the violas, slowly and expressively winds its way around the half-steps contained within the tritone between A and Eb. This tri-tone becomes the basis for the form of the following subject presentations, spinning out through the circle of fifths until the climax of the piece when the subject appears at the apex of the violin register, centered around the Eb found at the opening. This climax, occurring precisely at the golden mean of the movement, is marked by the first appearance of the percussion and keyboard instruments with a sustained timpani roll and an arpeggiated flourish in the celesta. The fugue then quickly descends through a series of inverted subject entries that mirror the music's initial ascent, returning ultimately to the muted A (*con sordina*) in the violas. The closing portions of the fugal first movement foreshadow the timbral and melodic material of the second, including its reliance on another traditional form (the sonata-allegro), melodic material that makes reference to the fugue subject, and the increasingly important role of percussive sounds in the timpani strikes and string pizzicato. However, it is the third movement that brings the percussion to the fore as a carrier of both melodic and rhythmic motives, acting as a catalyst for the string material that follows. For example, the movement opens with an extended percussion-only passage consisting of an *accelerando* in the xylophone that serves as a basis for the "written-out" tempo changes in the string *tremolandi*, and tri-tone glissandi in the timpani that appear later in various transformations throughout the ensemble in the movement's A-B-C-B-A form. Finally, the work's tightly knit motivicism, formal symmetry, and thorny chromaticism give way to an unbridled and rhapsodic dance featuring the folk-like melodies for which Bartók had become famous.

Shortly after *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* was premiered, the rise of Nazi powers in Budapest forced Bartók to flee Hungary for Switzerland, where Paul Sacher provided him sanctuary in the chalet of Saanen in Gruyère. He lived out the rest of his life as a foreign national -- a factor that, though for different reasons, unites all four composers featured tonight -- his eminence as a composer, musicologist, and performer earned him a post on the League of Nations until his death in 1940. It is worth noting as an epilogue that decades later Sacher would provide Bartók another kind of sanctuary, this time to his music. In 1973, the Paul Sacher Foundation was formed to preserve the primary documents of the world's important composers. A household name to anyone working in the field of contemporary music, the foundation holds an extensive collection of Bartók's sketches, manuscripts, programs, reviews, and correspondence. Also an essential resource for documentation of Brian Ferneyhough's music, it's not impossible to imagine that in another thirty-five years the composers on this program may find something else in common... -- *Aaron Helgeson*

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A black and white photograph of the San Diego skyline at night, with city lights reflecting on the water in the foreground. The skyline includes several prominent skyscrapers, some with illuminated windows and signs.

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