

Kyle Adam Blair presents:

AMERICAN BERSERK

AVANT-GARDE TREATMENTS OF AMERICAN JAZZ IDIOMS AND LEGENDS

11.18.2012
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

Stuart Saunders Smith – *Pinetop* (1977)

George Crumb – *Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik* (Ruminations on 'Round Midnight by Thelonius Monk) (2002)

1. Nocturnal Theme
2. Charade
3. Premonition
4. Cobweb and Peaseblossom (Scherzo)
5. Incantation
6. Golliwog Revisited
7. Blues in the Night
8. Cadenza with Tolling Bells
9. Midnight Transformation

John Adams – *American Berserk* (2001)

-10-minute intermission-

Elliott Carter – *Piano Sonata* (1945-46)

Thank you,

*Aleck: For more wisdom, counsel, and patience that I could ever ask for.

*J-Flo: For helping to make this shindig possible, and for informing me of my favorite nickname to date. "CAF" forever

*All my UCSD friends and colleagues: For always embracing me and my work with open ears and open arms.

*My family: For a blank check's worth of love and support.

*My beautiful wife-to-be Ashley: For all of your love and your patience with a man following a dream.

In partial fulfillment of the Masters of Arts in Music Performance degree.

Pinetop

Stuart Saunders Smith's interest in "inventing music of extreme rhythmic and melodic complexity" certainly reveals itself in *Pinetop*. The piece largely consists of a non-metered two-part contrapuntal dialogue between the left and right hands. Each hand has an ever-shifting number of subdivisions (between 1 and 9 usually) to perform within each successive beat. The hands almost never agree on this number, however, and the result is a tour de force in polyrhythmic permutations.

Melodically, although freely atonal, Smith utilizes some techniques espoused by "serialist" composers with long strings of notes and/or rhythms presented earlier on in the piece being re-presented upside-down or in reverse in later parts of the piece. The melodic content of each hand is often characterized by large leaps, explained to me by Smith as being a result of the transference of a marimbist's or vibraphonist's physical space and motions onto the keys of the piano.

Smith decrees that the piece be performed as "one long, continuous phrase". That long phrase, however, is divided temporally into a series of short moods or episodes. Articulation subtleties, dynamic shifts, tempo fluctuations and varying levels of polyrhythmic density often dictate the qualities of these moods. Although the piece often sits within a slow pulse (between 36 and 72 beats per minute) the unequal subdivisions between the hands can create as many as 15 attacks within a single beat. This density of melodic material combined with a slow pulse creates an intriguing musical world, at once both frenetic and relaxed.

Smith dedicates this work to pianist and early boogie-woogie pioneer Clarence "Pinetop" Smith. Although the two Smiths compose in different jazz styles, one gets the feeling that a piece such as this flows as easily and comfortably out of Stuart's mind as boogie-woogie flowed out of Pinetop's fingers.

Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik (Ruminations on "Round Midnight" by Thelonius Monk)

Around the turn of the 21st century, Italian pianist Emanuele Arciuli commissioned a number of composers, George Crumb among them, to each compose a variation on Thelonius Monk's seminal jazz standard "Round Midnight". Composers including Milton Babbitt, John Harbison, Michael Daugherty, and Frederic Rzewski contributed works of up to seven minutes in length to be compiled into a program and eventual recording of the "variations." The birth of this project calls to mind the story of Anton Diabelli sending a waltz to a number of composers in an effort to compile a set of variations. Rather than contributing a single variation to the set, Beethoven composed a separate set of 33 variations on his own: the legendary Diabelli Variations. While I'm not comparing Crumb's work to Beethoven's, I will say that Crumb, like Beethoven, went far above and beyond the call of duty by providing Arciuli a 22-minute, nine-movement work.

Crumb utilizes the melody, harmonic structure, and character of the Monk model in a variety of manners throughout the piece. Crumb's frequent exploration of the piano interior is not at all absent from this work. His vocabulary of scrapes, plucks, harmonics, and crossbeam strikes provides an other-worldliness to the work; an other-worldliness, I'd say, befitting of such a legendary jazz standard. Also included are quotes and references of popular classical works, including Debussy's "Golliwogg's Cakewalk", the popular opening motive from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and the quote of a theme from Strauss's orchestral tone poem *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*.

Based on their qualities, the nine movements of this work are laid out in a sort of symmetrical fashion not uncommon amongst Crumb's multi-movement pieces. The first and ninth movements are largely identical statements of the familiar Monk tune, the ninth having an added coda. The second and eighth movements feature sweeping gestures and are among the more virtuosic movements of the suite. The third and seventh movements are soft, heavy, and slower pieces with an emphasis on harmonic motion. The fourth and sixth movements are the lightest of the set, evoking scherzo-like qualities. The fifth movement, "Incantation", seems to be the keystone of the work and a conglomerate of all of these idiosyncrasies, including an emphasis on the tune found in movements 1 and 9 (not to mention the inclusion of the mallet strikes to the cross-braces of the piano found in both movements 1 and 9), moments of virtuosic flourishes similar to movements 2 and 8, a hefty, heavy two-chord ostinato in the bass recalling the character of movements 3 and 7, and scherzo-like gestures that recall movements 4 and 6.

American Berserk

"...transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral--into the indigenous American berserk."

--Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

"As its title suggests, 'American Berserk' is a short, high-energy work for virtuoso pianist. The title, from Philip Roth, hints at the darker, manic edge of American life evoked in his novel, "American Pastoral"...Influences of American jazz and bop playing mixed with impressions of Conlon Nancarrow's disjunct rhythmic world dominate the writing of this short, manic, bipolar scherzo."

--John Adams on *American Berserk*

In Philip Roth's novel, Seymour Levov struggles to hold on to a sense of upper-middle-class normalcy after his daughter's bombing of a local post office kills an innocent man in the midst of Vietnam War protests in the 1960s. Similarly, Adams' *American Berserk* depicts jazz-inspired music that struggles to hold on to a stronghold of normalcy in jazz music: the groove. A meter change here and an errant accent there give the piece a frenetic quality similar to Conlon Nancarrow's music for performers as well as his "studies" for pianola or player piano.

Harmonically, the building blocks for the work largely consist of major and minor triads, the chordal foundation of much of classical Western art music. However, these triads are flung against one another in an uncoordinated, contrapuntal fashion, creating a colorful but chaotic harmonic landscape.

Elliott Carter's Piano Sonata

It is certain that Elliott Carter can be counted amongst the giants of American art music history. Looking back on his massive body of complex and atonal musical compositions, it's interesting to think that his "early" works were composed with tonality in mind. (The *Piano Sonata* even utilizes key signatures!) It might be more interesting to think that he started composing this work, which would be deemed "early" in his output, when he was 36 years old.

Elliott Carter presents this dense, intricate work in two movements which both within themselves and within the context of the entire work present a reconfigured version of "classic" sonata form. The first movement strongly evokes the five-sharp key signature from the very outset of the work with two strong octaves on B. These octaves begin a majestic and poised type of music that is frequently juxtaposed against deft, dexterous, and at times treacherous counterpoint throughout the movement. The first theme of the loosely labeled "exposition" consists of constantly shifting rhythmic melodies largely based on intervals of perfect (open) fourths and fifths. One might say that the "scorrevole" or "flowing" legato passages recall the quick and agile motives often performed by jazz pianists Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson. The second theme, complete with a change of key signature to four flats, presents a modal and flowing three-part canon in a slower, stricter time structure. A lengthy "development" experiments with material from both themes, but is largely dominated by the character and vigor of the first. The "recapitulation" recalls both themes, but their statements are separated by a recollection of the opening music. The first movement closes with an intense flourish before settling down to an octave on B flat, a diminished unison below the opening B.

One could say that the second movement is really two movements in one, with Carter achieving the common fast-slow-fast layout of classical sonatas by inserting the final fast movement directly into the middle of the slow movement. The opening of the second movement presents the theme D-B-C-A in large chords that play on the natural resonance of the piano and give the music a churchbell-like character. Just as one feels comfortable with the majesty of it all, murmurs and agitations interrupt the serenity, culminating in the beginnings of a four-voice, jazz-like fugue in six flats. Complete with countersubject, episodes between theme statements, and varieties of contrapuntal presentations, this fugue undoubtedly epitomizes Carter's ever-present sense of craftsmanship and emphasis on structure. The fugue moves from compositional virtuosity to wild pianistic virtuosity before settling back into the poised recall of the opening of the movement. As the piece ends it often recalls the opening chords of the first movement, adding a palpable sense of cohesion and completion to the work. This sense of cohesion is never more strongly felt, however, than when the piece softly ends exactly as it began.

After a long and fruitful life in music, may Elliott Carter now rest in peace. 12/11/1908 - 11/5/2012