

Kyle Adam Blair presents:

BAND OF DAVID

4.3.2015 / 7 PM

Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

Variationen für Klavier, Op. 27 (1936) – Anton Webern

- I. *Sehr mäßig*
- II. *Sehr schnell*
- III. *Ruhig fließend*

Bagatelles (1985) – Peter Lieberson

1. Proclamation
2. Spontaneous Songs
3. The Dance

Visions fugitives, Op. 22, in 20 miniatures (1915-1917) – Sergei Prokofiev

10-MINUTE INTERMISSION

Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6 (1837) – Robert Schumann

Book I

1. *Lebhaft (F.u.E)*
2. *Innig (E.)*
3. *Etwas hahnbüchen (F.)*
4. *Ungeduldig (F.)*
5. *Einfach, (E.)*
6. *Sehr rasch und in sich hinein (F.)*
7. *Nicht schnell mit äußerst starker Empfindung (E.)*
8. *Frisch (F.)*
9. "Hierauf schloss Florestan und es zuckte ihm schmerzlich um die Lippen"
"Here Florestan fell silent, and a flicker of pain crossed his lips."

Book II

10. *Balladenmäßig sehr rasch (F.)*
 11. *Einfach (E.)*
 12. *Mit Humor (F.)*
 13. *Wild und lustig (F.u.E)*
 14. *Zart und singend (E.)*
 15. *Frisch (F.u.E.)*
 16. *Mit gutem Humor*
 17. *Wie aus der Ferne (F.u.E.)*
 18. "Ganz zum Überfluss meinte Eusebius noch Folgendes; dabei sprach aber viel Seligkeit aus seinen Augen."
"To crown it all, Eusebius said the following, his eyes full of bliss."
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Performer's Notes

Webern's *Variationen für Klavier*, his only solo piano work to be published during his lifetime, has sparked no shortage of discussion and analysis. Music theorists discuss the details of Webern's organization of pitches, rhythms, and dynamic markings while performers tend to focus their attention on less quantifiable facets of the piece: concerns about rubato, dealing with the "two-note slur" and its relationship to classical performance techniques, and managing Webern's unique 'hand-crossing' choreography. I find it safe to say that both methods of approaching the piece provide valuable information and insight into the work, but also assert that one viewpoint without the other provides an incomplete image of the piece, much in the same way that one can only view one half of a globe at a time.

The three movements of the *Variationen* exemplify Webern's penchant for brevity and his skill at exercising restraint while still including all the drama, craftsmanship, and scope of a larger work. The first movement reminds me of a skeletal waltz, depending largely on overlapping two-note slurs to provide momentum and flow. While the first movement contains palindromic structures that tend to function in a rhetorical manner, the second movement (lasting all of 30 seconds or so) utilizes symmetry around an axis point. In this quick, scherzo-like, binary-form movement that features juxtapositions of differently characterized pairs of single pitches, chords, or gestures, all the pitch material presented is in some way equidistant (to the half-step) from the A above middle C. Finally, the third movement, the longest of the three, bears the strongest resemblance to anything one might call a set of variations. However, one is not likely to hear the movement as a theme and variations in which the variations are tracked based on their musical distance from and dependence on a particular strand of thematic musical material. Rather, one is more likely to hear this movement as a set of theme-less variations or, more simply, as a set of 'differences' in which each new variation presents new characterizations and rhetorical structures which set it apart from the previous variation.

I've been thrilled to get to know **Peter Lieberson's *Bagatelles*** over the last year or so. It has been an entry point into a body of work that I was curious about before but never had the opportunity to study. "Proclamation" presents a bold, fanfare-like opening featuring shifting rhythmic patterns and plenty of lush writing for the sustain pedal. The pedal serves to create harmonies out of the energized melodic figures, harmonies that are not unlike those of Lieberson's colleagues Elliott Carter, Donald Martino, and Milton Babbitt. The second movement, "Spontaneous Songs", is a perfect example of Lieberson's tremendous capacity for lyricism. As I perform this movement I can't help but think of Lorraine Hunt-Lieberson, Peter's wife and renowned mezzo-soprano, for whom Lieberson wrote the tremendously powerful orchestral song cycle *Neruda Songs*, which won a Grawemeyer Award, and the *Rilke Songs* for voice and piano. Finally, Lieberson displays his elegance, charm, and wit in "The Dance", a waltz that spins out delightfully over a span of just over three minutes.

Sergei Prokofiev composed the twenty miniatures within *Vision fugitives* over the course of three years; 1915 through 1917. By the time he had begun these sketches he had already composed two piano sonatas, Op. 1 and Op. 14, his First and Second Piano Concertos, Op. 10 and Op. 16, a biting and aggressive Toccata, Op. 11, and five other sets of piano pieces. It can be theorized that much of the vigor and aggression of his early piano works might stem from his discontent while studying within the St. Petersburg Conservatory for Music, where he stayed until 1914. He received notoriety at the Conservatory, though some of that notoriety was undoubtedly gained through infamy, as evidenced by his poor marks and tense relationships with Conservatory faculty. If that aggression in fact spilled into his musical output, then perhaps *Visions fugitives* is evidence of a more amicable working environment upon leaving the Conservatory, as much of the work contains his most tame, soft, and lyrical writing to date. The occasional characteristic outburst of sarcasm, snarl, and/or wit occurs within the suite, but a many of the movements hint at, in my opinion, the compositional processes of an emerging gentler, more mature Prokofiev.

A possible translation of *Visions fugitives* could be "Fleeting Images," a term that aptly captures the essence of these pieces. I wonder, though, about the nature of brevity in these pieces and if duration creates/alters/impacts any type of visual corollary. Of course in visually perceived artistic mediums images can be either static or in motion. In time-based art, rather than the "normal" scenario of music evoking a sense of progression through time, is it possible that brevity can create the illusion of a static time-object that can be perused all at once? I urge the listener, between pieces, to try to contemplate what they've just heard in such a way that the endpoints of each movement are not separated by a journey, but rather close enough to be within a single 'aural gaze'.

Regarding the contextual background of **Robert Schumann's *Dauidsbündlertänze (Dances of the Band of David)*** Schumann wrote in 1954, "At the end of 1833 a large number of musicians, most of them young, convened in Leipzig...to exchange ideas on the art which constituted the food and drink of their lives: music. One cannot say that musical conditions in Germany at that time were highly propitious...Then one day the thought raced through the brains of these young hotheads: Let us stop being idle onlookers...let us attack, that the poetry of art may be restored to its rightful place."

This quote epitomizes the ideals of Schumann's fictitious league of musical warriors, the Davidsbund, who were charged with the task of battling the Philistines of the artistic world. Among those characters are Schumann's own polar compositional personalities: Florestan, the brazen, flamboyant extrovert and Eusebius, the thoughtful, sentimental introvert. The scores of each of the movements of *Dauidsbündlertänze* bear either a reference to or the initials of either one or both of these personalities.

The eighteen movements of *Dauidsbündlertänze* exemplify Schumann's unique skill at composing in short musical forms. This particular performance references the First Edition of the score. This choice was made especially with regard to the repeat structures of the movements, as the Second Edition score contains additional repeat markings that frame formal structures that in the First Edition are left irregular and, interestingly, more harmonically and dramatically sensible. In my opinion, these quirky formal structures found within the First Edition evoke all the character, wit, charm, and spontaneity that one can find in Schumann's most beloved compositions.

--Kyle Adam Blair