

“L’s. G.A.” (Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address) 1968

President Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address during the American Civil War in 1863:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

UC San Diego | Division of Arts and Humanities | Department of Music

Graduate Forum

30 January 2015 7pm
Conrad Prebys Music Center
Experimental Theater

Bone Alphabet

Brian Ferneyhough

Le Corps à Corps

Georges Aperghis

Le Prie-Dieu sur la terrasse

Luis de Pablo

Jonathan Hepfer, percussion

short pause

L's GA

Tape: Salvatore Martirano

Film: Ronald Nameth

Text: Abraham Lincoln, M.C. Holloway

Performer: Christopher Clarino

Brian FERNEYHOUGH (b. 1943, England): *Bone Alphabet* (1992)

When one sees a program note to Brian Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*, the first sentence often reads: "this piece is the most difficult work ever written for solo percussionist." Though I admit that such a bold statement was precisely what originally enticed me to approach this work, I have found this statement to be quite deceptive in practice.

Ferneyhough poses a riddle disguised as a liberty to the performer, asking him/her to find "seven instruments from high to low, sharing the qualities of short attacks and similar dynamic envelopes." The catch is that no two instruments adjacent to one another in the chosen scale may be of the same material type (i.e. wood, metal, skin, glass). In addition, the physical properties of the instruments must allow for the performer to realize the intricacies of the techniques demanded by the composer. Following this initial challenge, one must confront the notation, which can only be described as a type of dense, fastidious forest of layers of abstract rhythmic ideas superimposed upon one another, each demanding its portion of the performer's mental space (think of an astronaut being pulled by four different fields of gravity simultaneously). Perhaps an easier way to understand this is to think of each measure of the piece as a puzzle, which needs to be deconstructed by the performer and subsequently reassembled. There are 156 measures in the piece and each measure demanded between 2 and 20 hours to learn.

So after all of this crystalline and poetic travail, why does the piece sound more like a garbage truck driving down a bumpy road than Bach's *Goldberg Variations*? To me, this is truly the difficulty of the piece; at a certain point, one realizes that the typical pursuit of virtuosity is a cul-de-sac from which there is no return. Instead of the virtuosity of the hands and fingers (i.e. Liszt), one must possess a virtuosity of finding creative or interpretational solutions for an utterly non-idiomatic score, as well as the patience and discipline simply to stay with the piece until it is learned (this took about nine months of constant attention for me), all the while knowing that the payoff will certainly not come in the form of a recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon.

Of course, this is exactly when the piece starts to become interesting. "If you don't like what is being said, then change the conversation." Perhaps the piece isn't about rhythm at all. Perhaps it is not even about sound. Perhaps it concerns the eye and not the ear. Perhaps it is about the way energy is always in a state of becoming something new. How does a musical idea in the mind of a composer turn into the jagged dance of a percussionist? It is this translation of idea into unexpected art form that I love.

The piece is full of paradoxes, shifts of paradigms, shattered expectations and ultimately, failures. In the end, though, it is a marvelous journey, and as Werner Herzog said of his film *Fitzcarraldo*, "It is a great metaphor. For what? I don't know but it is a great metaphor."

Georges APERGHIS (b. 1945, Greece) *Le Corps à Corps* (1978)

In the simplest terms, Aperghis' *Le corps à corps* can be described as a schizophrenic melodrama in which the percussionist recounts the events of an intense race, including details about the participants' wounds, heroic leaps, clouds of dust flying and spectators erupting in cheer.

Avant dix heures, autour du cadavre, ils étaient déjà répartis tout le long de la course, des deux côtés, au corps à corps. Les seules actions visibles avaient lieu à la ligne Départ-Arrivée, où de temps à autre un chariot surgissait – saisissant le casque étincelant, faisant un bond, se blessant au bras – à toute blinde du nuage de poussière, et descendait en titubant de sa meule, que l'équipe d'entretien s'empressait d'emplier d'essence et de relancer sur la piste, avec un motard tout frais dessus. De sa blessure fraîche, à son bras le sang coule. D'immenses cris s'élèvent.

[Before ten o'clock, around the body, they were already dispersed all along the track, on both sides, packed shoulder to shoulder. The only visible actions occurred at the finish line, from which from time to time a chariot emerged – seizing the shining helmet, leaping up, injuring his arm – blasting out of the cloud of dust, and staggering down from his motorcycle, which the maintenance team rushed to refuel and launch back onto the track, with a brand new rider on it. From the fresh wound on his arm the blood flows. Immense cries arise.]

However, in my opinion, to state that *Le corps à corps* is simply the narration of a race does not really do it justice. The title of the piece is literally translated as "the body to body," but perhaps it would be deciphered less elegantly as "the struggle of two elements," or "the battle." Aperghis' text is not actually *about a race*, but rather *about the psychological state of someone involved in a race, or perhaps being chased*; there is no coherent narrative, but rather, a series of poetic images linked to the intensity of physical competition (at some points archaic and others futuristic) at the limits of physical exhaustion. I find the text to evoke a dream, complete with imagery both vivid and disorienting, from which one would wake up sweating, out of breath, with heart pounding.

De PABLO, Luis (b. 1930) *Le Prie-Dieu sur la terrasse* (1973)

It must have been about a decade ago that my former mentor Jan Williams first mentioned Luis de Pablo's *Le prie-dieu sur la terrasse* to me. As a percussionist and conductor, Jan had experienced the golden era of musical activity at SUNY Buffalo as one of the "Creative Associates" – a cadre of musical luminaries including Aki Takahashi, Morton Feldman, Sylvano Bussotti, Vinko Globokar, and Lukas Foss.

In describing *Le prie-dieu sur la terrasse*, Jan intimated to me that this was the work of one of the most vivid musical imaginations he had encountered during those years. The piece, he said, was full of wild graphic notation, strange rituals, and a suspended bass drum that evoked the voice of an 80 year-old tenor, passionately singing despite being past his prime. How could I not be intrigued?

One day last year, the Mexican percussionist Ricardo Gallardo told me the story behind the title of the piece, which – to the best of my recollection – goes like this: while Luis de Pablo was visiting Montreal one bitter winter, he looked out of the window of his hotel room one night and saw the roof of a nearby monastery. On this snow-covered terrace, he saw two things: a prayer desk (a *prie-dieu*), and footprints. The person who left these tracks was never spotted.