

Tommy Babin

Bass

Look She Said - Christian Wolff (1991)

Paint It Black - Michael Gordon (1988)

**Opus - John Forshee
(2016 - World Premiere)**

I Feel Pretty - David Lang (2001)

This performance is dedicated to Brad Firth aka Caribou Legs

Program Notes.

Look She Said – Christian Wolff, 1991

This piece consists of five movements.

Three have strictly notated pitches and rhythms, but nothing else aside from tempo indications like "easy" or "lively and strong".

Of those three, one is based on the lullaby "All The Pretty Horses", one is based on a Cajun fiddle tune, and the last is a combination of the two.

One has rhythm but no pitches, and one has neither.

In keeping with Wolff's general position on his own work, adaption, modification, consideration is expected – the given material is threadbare and open to interference – *"the sound of the performer making up his mind, or having to change it"*

I start the lullaby part as if it were a soothing lullaby, and the fiddle tune part as if it were a scratchy fiddle tune.

For the rest I'll refer to Wolff's answer to a question on trusting performers of his music.

"I still hope for some good will"

Paint It Black – Michael Gordon, 1988

"I wanted to take advantage of the very long strings, the very high notes and the very low notes — all at the same time. I tried to expand the idea of a solo bass piece: Could the bass play bass to itself? At a syncopated speed? In Paint It Black, I tried to make the bass sound like two instruments."

There's very little, if any mystery to this piece.

The consistent pulse, the rhythmic modulation across voices, and clear chromatic and diatonic harmonies are plainly obvious to the performer and audience alike.

Therein lies the difficulty – if even the passive listener can tell, at least on a general level, what the rules of the game are, they also know whether or not the performer is following those rules.

Everyone can see the cards.

The opening portion introduces the ways of division – primarily by either division of range into high/low and division of expression into hard/soft/staccato/legato – and once the hand is dealt to game begins.

Opus – John Forshee, 2016 (World Premiere)

The first two songs that I ever played with other people were “Iron Man” and “Paranoid” by Black Sabbath.

I’m unsure if I had ever even heard those songs before – at the time they seemed like dinosaurs from a different era that, at least on a superficial level, had seen better days.

But, my friends who had likely never heard recordings of the songs either showed them to me and we played them and participated, however insignificantly, in Rock and Roll.

Now, as a music fan for much longer than I had been as a pre-teen, I can see that there is a universal truth in the music of Black Sabbath. The hollow harmonies (due to Tony Iommi’s crippled left hand), disconnected vocals and pre-rock conformity bass lines represent a distillation of Rock’s most fundamental elements – the blues, societal alienation, freaking out the squares and playing music your way with your friends.

When Jon and I were discussing this piece I sent him the isolated bass lines from Black Sabbath Vol. 4 as potential source material and that’s the ball that he ran with.

The accompanying composer’s notes discuss the material matters of the composition itself so I defer to Jon in that area, however in preparing this performance I found myself asking the question WWGBD? – What would Geezer Butler do?

I Feel Pretty – David Lang, 2001

The performance notes for this piece indicate that there should be “dirty, lyrical and hard” and that it should maintain a consistent “demonic” character.

The obvious path to take, interpretation-wise, would be to imagine the sound of a flailing monster -Grendel’s mother or a Deadite – in an uncontrollable, murderous passion.

The piece, on paper, doesn’t look like that, however. It looks controlled and both rhythmically and harmonically restrained .

This piece is a process piece where the process is clearly on the table – a consistent sequence rhythmic groupings that expand and contract throughout the piece.

2-3-4-6-4-3-2, 2-3-4-6-4-3-2.

Like breathing, like something natural. Demonic as not an impassioned reversal of values but an acceptance that values are not relevant – not a devil but an animal.

The small pitch collection and lack of notated dynamism throughout the piece contribute to a feeling of dispassionate probing, looking for weaknesses – not a monster trying to kill a human but a dog trying to figure out how to eat a turtle.

The Christian Wolff quotes are taken from the article “..something hazardous with which we may try ourselves”, first published 1964 in the journal “*Collage: Dialoghi di Cultura, Nuova Musica e Arti Visive Contemporanee.*” , and republished in the collection “*Cues – Writings and Conversations*” (Musitexte, 1998)

The Michael Gordon quote is taken from the program notes of the premiere performance by Robert Black in Rotterdam, 1988

Composer's Note

Composers of the Catholic Mass have imbued mass settings with popular songs and idioms, often with discretion and cleverness, since at least the 14th-century. Mass settings, such as those based upon the popular folk tune *l'homme arme*, which were conceived around the melodic contour of a popular song usually implemented a greatly attenuated rendering of the song as a structural support called a *cantus firmus*, or 'fixed song'. The *cantus firmus* was often musically realized within the mass to the point of near unrecognizability to all but the musical connoisseur or initiate. In some of these mass settings, however, the *cantus firmus* may be heard clearly and followed throughout the music, and then *un*-heard throughout subsequent listenings; the quality of attention evoked by this cognitive duality can be exhilarating.

In the music of OPUS, composed expressly for bassist Tommy Babin, a similar practice is pursued, though the 'fixed songs' in this case are drawn out of favorite tracks from Black Sabbath's 1972 album Vol. 4. "Supernaut", "Changes", "Under the Sun", and "F/X" are among the tunes from Vol. 4 that serve as 'fixed songs' throughout this solo double-bass composition, with each given a unique musical realization within the work.

And there are other musical motivations at work within the piece too: settings of prayers from rituals of an infernal nature are included in OPUS, and with the text removed these prayers are rendered in the music similarly to "songs without words". These "prayers", alternating with music composed around the 'fixed songs' of Black Sabbath, form the substratum of this work. The verve and flourish given to the interpretation of these musical ideas within the work are evidence of the greatest musical motivation behind it all: the inimitable musical and instrumental mastery of Tommy Babin, without whose feedback, input, and inspiration not a single note could have been written with confidence. Tommy's deep insights about myriad musical traditions and performance practices continue to fund this work. After working with a musician of his calibre, I have found that my own conceptions of music, and of the double bass, are forever refined for the better.

Jon Forshee, Dec 2016