

Sara Daneshpour – April 2, 2017

Incises

Pierre Boulez
1925-2016

Pierre Boulez has been a controversial figure in contemporary music. An early adherent to serial composition, he went on to refine the system to incorporate rhythm, duration and texture into mathematical precision, a system termed Integral Serialism. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that Boulez originally trained to be a mathematician. He eventually divided his allegiance between mathematics and music, changing direction while studying higher mathematics in Lyon by switching – with parental disapproval – to the Paris Conservatoire. There, Boulez studied harmony with Olivier Messiaen, as well as composition.

‘It was in Messiaen’s class that Boulez, respected as well as encouraged by his teacher, first gave proof of exceptional abilities as a music analyst. Quick to detect genuine originality of craftsmanship, he equally quickly lost patience with music whose renown rested on anything less substantial. He viewed composition as a form of aesthetic research and demanded that it be conducted on stringently scientific (that is, logical) lines; in this light, the cult of personal stylistic development – a hangover from Romanticism – counted for nothing.’

G.W. Hopkins/Paul Griffiths
The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians

Like so many serial works of the mid-twentieth century, Boulez’s music is elegantly crafted, although that meticulous craftsmanship is not audible to the general music-loving public. But Boulez was composing for his peers, not for audience approval. His one enduring work, which put his name on the map, is the 1952-55 *Le marteau sans maître* (The Hammer without a Master). With *Le marteau*, he gradually became shining light of several European organizations devoted to avant-garde music.

Most of Boulez’s long life, however, was taken up with conducting. Beginning his professional career in the theatre and eventually modern opera, he gradually broadened his scope into the general orchestral repertory – always promoting contemporary music in his programming. He brought to the baton the same rigor as he did to composing, serving as guest conductor with major orchestras including as principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic, as heir to Leonard Bernstein.

Incises ("Interpolations") for solo piano was composed in 1994 for the Umberto Micheli Piano Competition. Boulez revised it in 2001, almost tripling its length and adding significantly to its complexity. The broader serial thinking over nearly half a century produced a distinctly more improvisatory melodic style, as Boulez was coming head to head with computer-generated music (*musique concrete*) and “chance” composition. Confronting *Incises* only in concert, critics have concentrated on their impression of its virtuosic brilliance rather than its structure.

Selections from
Die Kunst der Fuge, BWV 1080

Johann Sebastian Bach

From the Renaissance to this day, the study of counterpoint has been the foundation upon which aspiring composers have built their skills. Until the advent of atonal music, counterpoint was based on strict rules governing the relationship between consonant and dissonant harmonies. Throughout his life, Johann Sebastian Bach not only accepted the precepts of traditional counterpoint, but also took them to a new level, particularly in the fugue, the most demanding and difficult contrapuntal form.

Ever the pedagogue, as well as the inspired artist, Bach was fascinated with the intellectual, mathematical, aspect of music. Several of his most important works aspire to the intellectual limits of his art: *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (Book 1, 1722; Book 2, 1740), which explored the combination of free and strict counterpoint in 48 preludes and fugues in the twelve major and minor keys; *The Mass in B minor* (1749), much of it recycled from the best of his vocal and instrumental counterpoint; and finally, a series of monothematic compositions that occupied him in the last decade of his life: the so-called *Goldberg Variations* (1741), a multi-movement composition based on a single theme; *A Musical Offering* (1747), a playful gift to the musician-king Frederick II, chock full of musical conundrums, canons plus two trio sonatas, all based on a single theme; the canonic organ variations on *Von Himmel Hoch* (1748); and *Die Kunst der Fuge*.

Die Kunst der Fuge was Bach's final work, although he had composed and revised it in stages since the early 1740s, and the final fugue was probably cut off by his death. As with any work of this magnitude, it grew and changed over time, as can be seen from a surviving 1742 fair copy autograph manuscript. The governing idea was a comprehensive exploration of the contrapuntal possibilities inherent in a single musical subject. *Die Kunst der Fuge* was not only Bach's demonstration of the range of possibilities of the fugue, which he regarded as the quintessential means for conveying "perfect harmony," but also the exemplar of the ancient mathematical legacy of Western music.

In all probability it was not Bach's intention to have the work performed in its entirety at one time. The idea of "complete performances" of works such as this is a twentieth-century invention. In fact, there is no evidence that such a compendium would be intended for performance in public at all. It is a great musical thesis, the composer's *magnum opus* and by no means the first collection of this type during the period. More likely it was meant to be performed, studied and savored by musical cognoscenti at home or as part of their musical education, and that is one of the functions of *Die Kunst der Fuge* today. Its general plan proceeded from the simple to the complex, the simple *contrapuncti* reflecting the "*stile antico*" (sixteenth-century contrapuntal rules), while the later ones introduce late Baroque developments, including more complex counterpoint and chromaticism.

It was left to J. S. Bach's sons, especially Carl Philipp Emanuel, to see *Die Kunst der Fuge* printed in accordance with the wishes of his father, who had initiated the process and was able to supervise most of it. The original 1751 printing consisted of 13 pieces titled "*Contrapunctus*," two labeled "*Fuga*" and four called "*Canon*." The final fugue with four subjects was incomplete. The autograph and the first printed edition, in open score format, specifies no particular instrument or instrument combination.

Gaspard de la nuit

Maurice Ravel
1875-1937

One of Maurice Ravel's best friends, the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, introduced the composer to *Gaspard de la nuit*, an eerie set of prose poem ghost images by the early nineteenth-century writer Aloysius Bertrand. Influenced by the fantastic stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Bertrand's lyric prose was marked by exquisite refinement of verbal sounds, earning him the sobriquet "Goldsmith of verse."

In 1908 Ravel set three of the prose-poems to music, prefacing each one with an excerpt from a poem that had originally inspired Bertrand. In the first, *Ondine*, a mermaid attempts to lure the poet to the bottom of a lake to become king of the lakes. While Ravel did not necessarily follow the story line, the ending of the poem is clearly reflected in the music: "...and when I replied that I was mortal, she, pouting and sulky, wept two tears and then, with a brief burst of laughter, disappeared in a shower of dew." The unaccompanied melody represents the tears, followed abruptly by the wild arpeggios of the mermaid's laughter and her disappearance in the fading of the final chord.

Le Gibet (the gibbet) incorporates the insistent tolling of a bell as an ostinato throughout, without change in tempo, regardless of what else takes place around it. Bertrand's poem begins: "Ah! What do I hear? Is it the howling of the night wind or the sighs of a corpse hanging from the gibbet?" and concludes: "It is the tolling of the bell that sounds from the walls of a town beyond the horizon, and the hanging corpse glows red in the setting sun."

Scarbo is the devilish imp who appears under the bright midnight moon at a sleeper's bedside, bedeviling him with his dance, laughter and fingernails scraping on the silk curtains. Ravel's music is grotesque, opening with a theme and a trilled accompaniment associated with Scarbo. It then takes off into a wild ride full of musical tricks, harsh dissonances, irregular pauses, rapid repeated notes, wild leaps and general unpredictability, all around a few clearly discernable themes. Then the imp sneaks away as suddenly as he entered.

Scarbo provides a sharp contrast to the deliberate pace of the *Le Gibet*. Ravel said that he wanted to write something more difficult than Mily Balakirev's fantasy *Islamey*, which most pianists found daunting. According to pianist Vlado Perlemuter, the composer admitted to him that he started writing *Scarbo* as a caricature of Romanticism, but ended up captivated by Scarbo's ghoulish antics. At one point he wrote into the score the words "*Quelle horreur.*"

Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60

Frédéric Chopin
1810-1849

By the time Chopin composed the *Barcarolle* in the winter of 1845-46, his relationship with his longtime lover, French novelist George Sand, was deteriorating but not yet dead. The progressing consumption was taking its toll, making it impossible for him to perform in public, and forcing him to depend increasingly on the generosity of the music-loving aristocracy. Chopin dedicated the *Barcarolle* to Baroness Stockhausen, wife of the Hanoverian ambassador to France and mother of Elizabet Herzogenberg, who became a close friend of Johannes Brahms in his later years.

The barcarole, from the Italian word *barca* (boat), imitates the songs of the Venetian gondoliers as they maneuver their boats through the canals. Most barcaroles are in 6/8 or 12/8

time and have a lilting rhythm to suggest the gentle rocking of the boat. The gondoliers' songs were already popular throughout Western Europe in the eighteenth century, as English composer, historian and indefatigable traveler Charles Burney attested in 1771: "...[They were] so celebrated that every musical collector of taste in Europe is well furnished with them."

Although a number of composers, including Schubert and Mendelssohn, used the rhythm in songs and piano pieces, Chopin's *Barcarolle* is probably the first independent piece so named. The 13 barcaroles by Gabriel Fauré are its best-known successors, not counting, of course, the duet from Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

Piano Sonata No. 8 in B-flat major, Op. 84

Sergey Prokofiev
1891-1953

The year 1939 was momentous for Prokofiev, both personally and professionally. Estranged from his wife Lina, he spent the summer in Kislovodsk in the Caucasus where he had vacationed many summers as a child. There he met Maria-Cecilia Abramovna Mendelson – Mira – who was to become his soul-mate for the final 14 years of his life. At Kislovodsk he began the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Piano Sonatas, known as the "War Sonatas," working on them, often simultaneously, between 1939 and 1944. Both the war and the evacuation of Moscow delayed the premieres.

While the Sixth and Seventh sonatas are intense works, recalling the abrasive style of Prokofiev's youth, No. 8, dedicated to Mira, is lyrical to the point of neo-romanticism. Many of the melodies and harmonies recall lush moments from the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1938), especially a delicate theme that first appears in the middle of the first movement and subsequently serves as a gentle refrain. On the other hand, Prokofiev seems not to have been able to resist indulging in flights of virtuosic fancy, which periodically interrupt the idyllic mood of the first movement. The mood continues into the *Andante sognando* (Dreamy) second movement.

Although toccata-like themes dominate the energetic finale, in the middle the composer brings back the romantic refrain, as well as the theme from the opening of the sonata. It is almost as if the sonata were a dialogue between the *vivace*, virtuosic Prokofiev and the '*andante dolce*' Mira.

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