

Drew Petersen – September 17, 2017

Toccatà in F-sharp minor, BWV 910

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

The history of the toccata (from the Italian “to touch” and, more specifically to music, “to play a keyboard instrument”) dates back to the sixteenth century. Developed by Girolamo Frescobaldi during the early seventeenth century into an extensive, freely composed keyboard piece with several contrasting sections, the toccata underwent many alterations in form and style throughout the Baroque period. Among its principal exponents in northern Europe were Johann Pachelbel and Dietrich Buxtehude, both of who had a significant influence on the young Bach.

We know of seven of Bach’s keyboard works titled “toccata;” the designation “toccata and fugue” was a separate animal. None of the seven extant toccatas has come down to us in his hand, but there are copies that correspond to Bach’s tenure in his first post as organist at the *Neue Kirche* in Arnstadt (1703-1707) and in Weimar (1708-1714), where he had a more prestigious job at the ducal court. These toccatas were most likely originally conceived for organ, the absence of a pedal part making them suitable for modest instruments in small churches.

Probably composed in Weimar in 1712, the Toccata in F-sharp was first published in 1837.

Fantasy Pieces, Op. 6

Charles Tomlinson Griffes
1884-1920

American composer, pianist and teacher Charles Tomlinson Griffes was one of the most promising American composers of the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, he did not live to fulfill his promise, dying, probably in the influenza pandemic of 1919, after only a dozen or so years of creativity. His musical studies in Germany with Engelbert Humperdinck (of *Hänsel and Gretel* fame) instilled in him a thorough command of German late Romanticism, but after his return to the USA in 1907 he became influenced by the Impressionism of Debussy and the oriental harmonies of Japan, introduced to him by a singer who returned from Japan with copies of Japanese melodies. Griffes had to support his widowed mother and family and took a post as music instructor at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, NY, where he felt isolated, unappreciated and unhappy as a schoolmaster. Although he hoped it would prove a temporary situation, it lasted until his death

Griffes composed the three Fantasy Pieces in 1912-13 and published them in 1915. Each piece is preceded by a literary excerpt that sets the verbal images reflected in the music. The first, *Barcarolle*, begins with the characteristic gentle rocking rhythm and a simple three-note melody, gradually picking up energy in parallel with the moods reflected in an excerpt from a poem by Scottish poet William Sharp (1855-1905).

...The old impetuous sea changeless, yet full of change,
it seem the very mirror of those dreams we call men’s lives
...As...One great wave doth rise and scorn an ocean-grave
and leaves its crown of foam where the high cliffs stare seaward steadily:

so from love's throbbing, pulsing sea all lightning-lit by passion,
reared a mighty wave resistlessly.

Despite moments of Debussy-like pentatonic reminiscences, the harmonies of the middle section are quite original.

The second, *Notturmo*, a more introspective and dreamy piece, was inspired by a poem of French Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896):

*L'étang reflète, profond miroir,
la silhouette du saule noir où le vent
pleure
...Rêvons; c'est l'heure*

The pool reflects, a deep mirror, the
silhouette of the black willow where the
wind weeps
...Let us dream; it is time

The third piece, *Scherzo*, became instantly popular. In 1919 Griffes orchestrated it, renaming it *Bacchanale*. Again, it bears the marks of Debussy's influence. An anonymous quotation preceding the music, perhaps by the composer himself, is also reminiscent of the titles of several of Debussy works:

From the palace of enchantment there issued into the night sounds of unearthly revelry.
Troops of genii and other fantastic spirits danced grotesquely to a music now weird and
mysterious, now wild and joyous.

Piano Sonata, Op. 26

Samuel Barber
1910-1981

As one of America's foremost composers of the twentieth century, Samuel Barber always gracefully avoided being drawn into the doctrinaire world of the compositional "isms" of his time, particularly serialism. Instead, all of his works, from music for solo piano to opera, comprise a lush lyricism, often freely atonal, but more often flagrantly and unfashionably tonal. Barber was not composing for the academy, but rather for audiences, musicians and critics who embraced his more conservative idiom.

The Piano Sonata is associated with an eclectic Who's Who in the American music of the period. Commissioned by Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers, it was a landmark event at the premiere in January 1950. The pianist was none other than Vladimir Horowitz, for whom Barber wrote the work. And it was the first time a pianist of world stature had premiered a major piano work by an American composer. The pianist and several critics hailed it as the first important piano sonata written by an American, and Horowitz – not a great aficionado of contemporary music – continually played and promoted it. "Barber is one of the few American composers who knows how to write for the piano," he wrote. "...Either they [American composers] write music that is very pianistic, but has no substance, or write music that has substance but isn't pianistic."

Barber finished the first movement in short order but took almost two years to finish the Sonata, in part because he succumbed to the cultural and political distractions of Italy while he was supposed to be working on it during a stay at the American Academy in Rome. Upon his return to the United States, he doggedly set about completing the remaining three movements, experiencing periodic creative blocks while Horowitz nagged him.

The Sonata is technically difficult and combines Barber's romantic lyricism with passages of chromatic complexity. Nevertheless, the structure and thematic development of all four movements are characteristically transparent. The opening movement is dominated by a heavy, chordal main theme, while the Scherzo is almost the reverse image, with rapid, feathery chromatic pyrotechnics, punctuated by a few blue notes. The somber third movement is the most tonally coherent, romantic and lyric. The final movement, a fugue that can almost be called a fugal toccata, may have been inspired by the composer's having just purchased a complete Bach edition. Barber attributes its angry mood, however, to a phone call from Mrs. Horowitz, complaining about the delay in delivering the Sonata and calling him a "constipated composer." "That made me so mad," wrote Barber, "that I ran out to my studio and wrote that [fugue] in the next day."

Piano Sonata

Elliott Carter
1908-

2012

Perhaps the only Western composer to have reached centenary status, Elliott Carter was one of the true "Renaissance men" of the twentieth century. His career included teaching of mathematics, physics and classical Greek at St. John's College in Annapolis, MD, in addition to teaching music at the Peabody Conservatory, Columbia, Yale and Cornell Universities. He was one of the many American composers who made the pilgrimage to Paris between the wars to study counterpoint with Nadia Boulanger, the famous French composition teacher. Boulanger, incidentally, was justly revered for her acceptance – and indeed insistence – that each of her students develop his or her own voice. Hence the diversity in style of her many students.

Carter is known today primarily for his uncompromisingly complex and difficult music, as exemplified in his five string quartets or his Concerto for Orchestra. He adheres to no "school" of composition, following his own inner musical voice. His last works were a Horn Concerto and *Interventions for Piano and Orchestra*, both composed in 2007!

Carter's music was not always so forbidding. In the 1930s and early '40s his music appeared more in the spirit of Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber than of the serial theory and deliberate atonality of Arnold Schoenberg and his disciples. But the Sonata, composed in 1945-46, heralds the more austere and difficult Carter. It floats between tonality and atonality, eschewing the insistence on continual dissonance of the Serialists, but also avoiding melody. It evokes intense emotional responses, largely on the basis of the passion of its expressive content. The Sonata is in two movements, subdivide into sections by abrupt changes in tempo and rhythm.

The first movement juxtaposes crashing chords suggesting a tonal context and fluid, complex, atonal passagework, punctuated by frequent pregnant pauses. Nevertheless, its formal structure is a readily apparent sonata-allegro: exposition, development, recapitulation and coda. The complexity of Carter's use of small motivic units in both pitch and rhythm become less apparent to the listener than to the performer, who feels the patterns under his or her fingers, as well as aurally. The frequent tempo changes further cloud the perception. The prolonged rests, ironically, provide the opportunity for the listener to digest the previous passages.

The second movement, also constructed in broadly classical ternary (ABA) form, seems to begin as a conventionally slow movement (A), but it soon gains momentum (marked *Allegro*) to finally erupt into a full-fledged fugue (B). Another burst of figurative writing (*Allegro giusto*), eventually returns to a varied version of the *Andante*, including references to the opening chords of the Sonata. The gentle conclusion brings to a close both the pianistic, rhythmic and tonal tensions.

Waltzes, Op. 34

No. 1 in A-flat major

No. 2 in A minor

No. 3 in F major

Frédéric Chopin

1810-1849

While it continued its popularity in the ballroom to the present day, starting with the nineteenth century the waltz also became also an expressive medium for the classical composers, such as Weber in his *Aufforderung zum Tanz*. It became a musical form for the concert hall, usually in un-danceable form. This was especially true in the unique and original waltzes of Chopin. After adapting the Polish mazurka and polonaise to his purpose, Chopin turned to the waltz in 1827 and composed 20, the last, which is lost, in 1848.

When Chopin came to Vienna in 1830, the waltz had reached enormous popularity as a dance. But Chopin's waltzes were far more introspective and personal than the usual dance music. Robert Schumann, never one to shy away from hyperbole, said about another one of Chopin's waltzes that it was "...a salon piece of the noblest kind; if he played it for dancers, Florestan [referring to one of his pseudonyms] expects half of the ladies to be countesses at least."

Opus 34, No. 2 was the first to be composed, in 1831; No. 1 followed in 1835. Both were published together with the third, composed just before publication in 1838.

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