

JAANI KIRIK CONCERT HALL

Tuesday 5 June 2012

XX Music Festival

STARS OF THE WHITE NIGHTS

with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation

V Festival of Contemporary Music

NEW HORIZONS

AMERICANA

Alan FEINBERG (*piano*)

Aaron BOYD (*violin*)

Jesse MILLS (*violin*)

Nicholas CORDS (*viola*)

Fred SHERRY (*cello*)

Concert Curator: **Alan FEINBERG**

Producer: **Elena SIYANKO**

The programme includes works by

**Ruth Crawford Seeger, John Cage, Milton Babbitt,
Robert Helps, Mario Davidovsky, Morton Feldman,
Igor Stravinsky, Roger Sessions, Charles Wuorinen**

This programme has been made possible thanks to the support
of the *Trust for Mutual Understanding* and private donors in New York

Partner of the Mariinsky Theatre



There will be one interval

Part I

Ruth Crawford Seeger

Prelude No 1

Prelude No 9

Performed by Alan FEINBERG

Piano Study in Mixed Accents

Performed by the Quintet

John Cage

Pieces No 1, No 4 and No 6

from the cycle *Six Melodies for Violin and Piano*

Performed by Jesse MILLS and Alan FEINBERG

Milton Babbitt

Partitions

(dedicated to Robert Helps)

Minute Waltz (or 3/4 ± 1/8)

(dedicated to Roger Sessions)

It Takes Twelve to Tango

Playing for Time* from the cycle *Time

(dedicated to Alan Feinberg)

Performed by Alan FEINBERG

Robert Helps

Nocturne for String Quartet

Performed by the String quartet

Mario Davidovsky

Synchronism No 9 for Violin and Tape Recorder

Performed by Aaron BOYD

Part II

Morton Feldman

Intersection for tape recorder

The Viola in My Life, Part III

Performed by Nicholas CORDS and Alan FEINBERG

Igor Stravinsky

Double Canon

Performed by the String quartet

Roger Sessions

Canons for string quartet

(in memory of Stravinsky)

Performed by the String quartet

Charles Wuorinen

Piano Quintet No 1

Performed by the Quintet:

Alan FEINBERG (piano), **Aaron BOYD** (violin), **Jesse MILLS** (violin),
Nicholas CORDS (viola), **Fred SHERRY** (cello)

In the decades after WWII the New York music scene witnessed an explosion of new compositional ideas, activities and personalities. Performers and audiences faced new technical and aesthetic challenges, and there was an engaged and enthusiastic reception for the “new music” that allowed it to burgeon despite the sceptical or downright negative reaction from some sections of the music world. This programme presents some of the luminaries of that period and samples of their various outputs. They all knew and interacted with each other – sometimes as close friends, sometimes as barely tolerant colleagues. This particular programme is a kind of “snapshot” of some of the New York scene with which I was deeply involved. All of the composers on the programme except Stravinsky and Ruth Crawford Seeger are people to whom I have had some personal connection. Several of them have written for me and I have been involved in numerous premieres of their music.

There are two main trends in the post-WWII music of New York that most interested me. They are related, but they are antithetical. One trend was of composers seeking to liberate ideas about what music and musical form are through new aesthetics and new compositional strategies and the other trend was seeking to develop a new musical grammar and structures that, while anchored to the great canon of western music, would revolutionise and re-energise the pursuit of “serious” composition. On one extreme was John Cage with his new aesthetic approach to music, his embracing of oriental philosophy and paradigms for the composition of music and his joy in the inclusion of the aleatoric in both composition and performance. At the other end of the spectrum composers such as Milton Babbitt sought to explore the ramifications of post-tonal music that developed from Schoenberg, Webern and late Stravinsky and to create new structures that arose from the individual materials used in the compositional process. Both of these trends were greatly influenced by the development of electronic music. Some composers created pieces out of “found” electronic or recorded sounds maintaining control over the larger elements of the composition (Feldman’s *Intersection*) and some used electronics to take control of subtle uses of dynamics, speed and rhythm that live performers had not previously been considered able to reproduce (Babbitt). These interests pushed the boundaries of virtuosity for performers and also led to a blending of the two mediums to produce a new, third medium (Davidovsky’s *Synchronisms*) of enhanced instruments and counterpoint.

Both of these “radical” trends were at odds with the more dominant fashion of composing music for the “everyman”: a fashion that existed in different forms in many different countries. Both of these approaches also led to the development of exciting and sometimes daunting new virtuoso demands on performers. Initially, to the public, the results of a totally chance composition or a totally serialised composition seemed ironically similar. As individuals worked and matured, however, the musical languages became more distinct, more articulate, more individual and more uniquely expressive of the composer’s personality.

Ruth Crawford Seeger was an extraordinary and pioneering composer. One of her most influential teachers was a student of Scriabin, and this link can be heard in the Preludes that open the concert. It seemed an appropriate nod in bringing this programme to Russia. The *Piano Study in Mixed Accents* from 1932 that we have arranged was radical in its tonality, texture, rhythm and, perhaps most strikingly, in the three different dynamic schemes that could be selected by the performer.

The selections from **Cage’s** *Six Melodies* are a good introduction to Cage’s early musical traits. Cage creates simple melodies (*à la* Satie) and accompanies them with a sparseness that heightens the listeners’ perception of the rhythm and

the timbre of the sounds. This music brings the listener to the contemplation of sounds, rhythms and the simplicity of a Zen garden.

Of all the “twelve-tone” music that I know, **Babbitt’s** is the most radical in terms of its structure and aesthetics. These piano works (which a friend once described as monumental miniatures) illustrate the essential focus of his music: counterpoint. They also illustrate the influence of computer music on the demands asked of acoustic performers. What makes the music so riveting is that the counterpoint between the various partitions of the tone rows (which are never directly stated), the dynamics, the register patterns and the rhythmic structure are so high in energy and complex that the result is a dazzlingly canonical mobile held up for our ears that sparkles and mutates at speeds which force the listener to admire all the wit and shimmer without necessarily being able to get all the punch lines.

Robert Helps, one of my teachers, was unusual in that he was both a pianist in the grand romantic tradition and a midwife to many modernist composers (such as Babbitt and Sessions). As a composer he married both of these worlds. His compositional output is largely piano-centric and the Nocturne for strings is somewhat unusual. It clearly links modern compositional techniques controlling motif and intervallic procedures with a romantic sense of line, phrasing and overall form.

Mario Davidovsky (who studied with Babbitt and was a technician for *Varèse*) is a kind of modern-day Schéhérazade. He has a vivid and glorious musical imagination and he is a brilliant storyteller. In the numerous works which he has composed for instruments and electronic tape he has managed to blend the two mediums so profoundly that he has, in essence, created new instruments. It is his uncanny knack of the art of narrative however, that allows the listener never to feel lost although they are travelling through new territory: there is always a new sound or phrase that points you in the right direction.

Morton Feldman ended up rejecting the “concrete music” of his early tape composition in favour of the development of his own unique form of musical tapestries. His slow, soft (always potentially softer) weavings of pitches take the listener deep into the warp and weft of his sound world. He wished to create the musical equivalent of the “flat surface” of painters such as Rothko and Guston. A close friend of Cage’s (and quite a character to boot!), he was inspired to carry his ideas to “groundbreaking” and “non-Hegelian” heights. The result is an ecstatic and mesmerising fascination with pitch and the creation of an oeuvre that seems to gain more and more admirers each year.

The short **Stravinsky** piece is included to reflect the enormous influence his contrapuntal and twelve-tone writing had had on some of these composers. **Sessions**, who along with Copland was one of the “deans” of American music, was a major influence on the New York scene.

Charles Wuorinen is an incredibly prolific composer who has developed a unique style that features the balancing of small and large-scale structural relationships. It is almost as if Beethoven were meeting fractals with apologies to Purcell. The Quintet has formal connections to all parts of the piece and the clearly discernible sections within the movements (such as developments and codas.) The sheer jaw-dropping intensity and kineticism of the parts of the work paired with moments of wit and moments of stretched or suspended time give the music great power. Although in a completely different manner, Wuorinen, like Babbitt, wields his counterpoint with a dramatic rhythmic flair which is both very American and very typical of New York.

It is true that any one of these composers could themselves be the focus of a festival, as they have all produced extensive oeuvres of powerful music. This is a small but personal sampling of the New York music scene in which I grew up.

I would like to thank Fred Sherry, for decades one of the most important and essential performers on the New York scene, for his participation in this project and bringing his virtuosity, wit, advice, and passion to the task. I am also grateful to Nicholas Cords, Jesse Mills and Aaron Boyd, three incredible musicians from New York who have made this project both possible and tremendously enjoyable.

Alan Feinberg

Five-time Grammy nominated **Alan Feinberg** has forged a remarkable career based on musical exploration. His intelligence, integrity and affinity for an unusually wide range of repertoire place him among the few artists who are able to build a bridge between the past and the present. Championing music ranging from Bach to Babbitt, Feinberg has a uniquely creative approach to programming. With well over three hundred premieres to his credit (works by such composers as John Adams, Milton Babbitt, John Harbison, Steve Reich, and Charles Wuorinen), he is well-known for recitals that couple old and new music together and put a fresh and provocative perspective on both.