

Festival of Contemporary Music New Horizons at the Jaani Kirik Estonian church, 5 June 2012

“Americana” Program Notes

By Alan Feinberg



Ruth Crawford Seeger: Preludes #1 and #9, Study in Mixed Accents; John Cage: 3 pieces from Six Melodies (1, 4, &6); Milton Babbitt: Partitions (for Robert Helps) - Minute Waltz - It Takes 12 to Tango - Playing for Time: from Time Series (for Alan Feinberg); Robert Helps - Nocturne for String Quartet; Mario Davidovsky - Synchronism #9 for Violin and Tape;

After intermission:

Morton Feldman - Intersection (1953) for magnetic tape; The Viola in My Life (part 3); Igor Stravinsky - Double Canon; Roger Sessions - Canons for String Quartet (these canons are grouped together); Charles Wuorinen - Piano Quintet #1

In the decades after WWII the N.Y. 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 skeptical or downright negative reaction of some parts of the music world. This program 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 program is kind of a snapshot of some of the New York scene that I was deeply involved with. All of the composers on the program except Stravinsky and Ruth Crawford Seeger are people to whom I have had 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 antithetical. One trend was of composers seeking to liberate ideas about what is music and musical form through new aesthetics and new compositional strategies and the other trend was seeking to develop new musical grammars and structures that, while anchored to the great canon of Western Art music, would revolutionize and re-energize the pursuit of "serious" composition. On one extreme was John Cage and 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 aleatoric in both composition and performance. On 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 Intersection) and some used electronics to take control of subtle uses of dynamics, speed, and rhythm that live performers had not been considered able to perform (Babbitt). These interests pushed the boundaries of virtuosity for performers and also led to a melding of the two mediums to produce a third new 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 new virtuosic demands on performers. Initially, to the public, the results of a totally chance composition or a totally serialized composition seemed ironically similar. But, as individuals worked and matured the musical languages became more distinct, more articulate, more individual, and more uniquely expressive of the composer's personality.

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 Prelude that opens the concert. It seemed an appropriate nod in bringing this program 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 (a la Satie) and accompanies them with a sparseness that heightens the listeners perception of the rhythm and the

timber 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 its structure and aesthetics. These piano works 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 registrational patterns, and the rhythmic structure are so high energy and complex that the result is a dazzlingly canonical mobile held up for our ears that is sparkling and mutating at speeds which force the listener to admire all the wit and shimmer without necessarily being able to get all the punchlines.

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

Davidovsky (who studied with Babbitt and was a technician for Varese) is a kind of modern day Scherezade. He has a vivid and glorious musical imagination and he is a brilliant story teller. In the numerous works which he composed for instruments and electronic tape he has managed to meld the two mediums so profoundly that he has, in essence, created new instruments. It is his uncanny

knack of the art of narrative though, that allows the listener to never feel lost though they are traveling through new territory: there is always a new sound or phrase that points you in the right direction.

Feldman ended up rejecting the "music concrete" of his early tape composition in favor of the development of his own unique form of musical tapestries. His slow, soft (always can be 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) he was inspired to carry his ideas to "groundbreaking" and "non-Hegelian" heights. The result is an ecstatic and mesmerizing 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 on some of these composers. Sessions, who along with Copland was one of the deans of the American music scene and a major influence on the New York scene.

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 kind of like Beethoven meets fractals with apologies to Purcell. The Quintet has formal connections between all parts of the piece and clearly discernible sections within the movements (such as developments and codas.) The sheer jaw-dropping intensity and kineticism of parts of the work paired with moments of wit and moments of stretched or suspended time give the music a grand power. Although

it is in a completely different manner, Wuorinen, like Babbitt, wields his counterpoint with a dramatic rhythmic flair which is both very American and very New York.

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

I would like to thank Fred Sherry, for decades one of the most important and essential performers on the New York scene, for joining in on this project and bringing his virtuosity, wit, advice, and passion to the project. I would also like to express my gratitude to Nicholas Chords, Jesse Mills, and Aaron Boyd, three incredible musicians from New York, who made this project possible and fun.

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 300 premieres to his credit (by such composers as John Adams, Milton Babbitt, John Harbison, Steve Reich, and Charles Wuorinen) he is well known for recitals that pair old and new music and put a fresh and provocative perspective on both.

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