

Modern Virtuosos

Virtuosity has long held a certain fascination for both audiences and composers. For an audience, the feats of a virtuoso are a kind of miracle witnessed, an almost supernatural wonder. The high-wire excitement of virtuosity is generated by waves of nervous anticipation and awestruck relief. The virtuoso's musical power is unbounded, uncanny, even unnatural – the legend of Paganini's "pact with the devil" attests to this. To behold a virtuoso is to indulge in the delight of human achievement, and the enchantment which comes from experiencing a performance which is magical, yet mortal. For a composer, the allure of virtuosity is perhaps an intellectual appeal, a desire to express the quintessence of an instrument, and to exploit its capabilities completely. But there is also an inherent creative pitfall in virtuosity, one in which mechanical brilliance eclipses musical vision. Composer Luciano Berio expresses this friction well:

I hold a great respect for virtuosity even if this word may provoke derisive smiles and even conjure up the picture of an elegant and rather diaphanous man with agile fingers and an empty head. Virtuosity often arises out of a conflict, a tension between the musical idea and the instrument, between concept and musical substance.

The works on tonight's program attempt to exploit this tension, to balance the outward display of execution with an inner artistic core, a meaningful musical statement. Each piece has a distinctive account of virtuosity, of the relationship between "concept and musical substance." They use means which are connected to the venerated tradition of the virtuoso, but yet are set apart from that tradition in uniquely modern ways. Here, practical innovation is balanced in equal measure with creative innovation. The "modern virtuoso" thus embodies a combination of technical dexterity and intellectual acuity, a blend of hand and head.

Luciano Berio: *Sequenza IXb* for alto saxophone

Luciano Berio's 14 solo *Sequenzas* span the length of the composer's remarkable career. Beginning with *Sequenza I* (1958) for flute, the series constitutes a sweeping compendium of solo writing, undertaken for an extraordinary variety of instruments. His instrumental choices in the *Sequenzas* run the gamut from standard concert instruments (piano, violin, cello) to unusual solo voices (accordion, trombone, bass clarinet). Each piece explores the character of a single instrument and the technical capabilities of its performer. Beyond a concern simply for the idioms and idiosyncrasies of a particular instrument, Berio's focus in the works reflects his notion that "a musical instrument is in itself a piece of musical language." As a result, the *Sequenzas* create an engaging interplay between an instrument's rich technical capabilities and the dramatic facets of its personality, its musical "rhetoric." Berio described his compositional approach in these works as one which "develops a musical commentary between the virtuoso and his instrument by disassociating various types of behavior and then putting them back together again." The *Sequenzas* thus gain a new layer of challenges, a kind of intellectual virtuosity: the ability to navigate the stereotypical gestures of an instrument's repertoire within new and unfamiliar contexts.

Always a self-reflective composer, Berio frequently revisited his compositions, creating new versions, re-interpretations and adaptations. His *Sequenza IXb* (1981) for alto saxophone is a transcription of his earlier *Sequenza IX* for clarinet. (And *Sequenza IXb*, in turn, became the basis for a larger work, *Chemins VII 'Récit'* for saxophone and orchestra.) The word "sequenza" [sequence] has several musical meanings, but in this context might best be characterized as a fixed succession of notes. The melodic "se-

quence" in *Sequenza IXb* is heard at the beginning of the piece, and its subsequent variations, permutations and transformations are the subject of the work's overall narrative. The saxophone begins in a volatile way, with fluid, expressive lines punctuated by long, held tones. (Berio marks the score "*un poco instabile.*") The significant technical demands of the work emerge slowly, as the surface of the music becomes progressively more animated and unpredictable, the phrases darting between high and low registers, the character alternating between furtive murmuring and resolute stridency. Toward the end of the work, the florid and developing musical phrases are interrupted by a loud, penetrating, sustained note – the highest note on the instrument. The note returns again and again, inescapably demanding attention, like a worrisome doubt. Gradually the excitement subsides, a relative calm returns and the music recedes to a state of qualified equilibrium. Nonetheless, the high note asserts its presence to the end, now as a faint echo, a distant memory.

Esa-Pekka Salonen: *Lachen Verlernt*

In *Lachen verlernt* (*Laughing unlearned*), by fellow Finn Esa-Pekka Salonen, the composer pays homage to two of his musical predecessors: Schoenberg and Bach. The title of the work is drawn from poems used by Schoenberg in his seminal melodrama *Pierrot lunaire*. The poems, German translations of the French symbolist poet Albert Giraud, feature the *commedia dell'arte* figure of Pierrot, a sad, moonstruck clown. In the verse entitled *Gebet an Pierrot* [Prayer to Pierrot], the narrator proclaims that he can no longer laugh, crying out "*Pierrot! Mein*

Lache/Hab ich verlernt!” [Pierrot! My laughter/I’ve forgotten how to laugh!]. He entreats the naïve clown, the “horse doctor of the soul,” to restore his good cheer. The clown as an anodyne for the psyche, a salve for the spirit, proved an especially potent idea for Salonen, who writes: “I felt that this is a very moving metaphor of a performer: a serious clown trying to help the audience to connect with emotions they have lost, or believe they have lost.”

The breadth of Salonen’s work, and also its form, make reference to one of the best known solo violin pieces, Bach’s *Chaconne* in D Minor (from *Partita No. 2*). As Salonen describes it, “*Lachen Verlernt* is essentially a *chaconne*, which in this case means that there is a harmonic progression that repeats itself several times. The harmony remains the same throughout the whole piece; only the surface, the top layer of the music changes.” The repetitions in *Lachen verlernt* are expressed by changes in surface texture and, as in the Bach *Chaconne*, they gradually build in intensity to create the exciting and dramatic shape of the piece. The opening measures begin quietly, with a plaintive melody in the upper register. Thicker, robust writing soon follows, as does a recurring motive in the work: steady, ascending lines played dramatically and athletically as “broken” chords on several strings. The music becomes increasingly animated and impassioned; eventually a breathless *moto perpetuo* races forward. At the work’s end, the full range and capacities of the instrument are on display and, as the composer describes it: “the music becomes faster and more frenzied until it develops an almost frantic character, as if the imaginary narrator had reached a state of utter despair.” Then, as perhaps a gentle mockery of its extravagant histrionics, the work’s final measures suddenly lose momentum and conclude in a state of delicate tranquility.

Liza Lim The Four Seasons (After Cy Twombly)

The paintings of artist Cy Twombly were the impetus for Australian composer Liza Lim’s large-scale piano work, *The Four Seasons*. The composer relates:

I spent time at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in January 2007 and was very inspired by the works by Cy Twombly on display, in particular, the massive four-paneled work *Quattro Stagioni*. The combination of ecstatic saturated color, linear calligraphic dynamism and paint washes veiling poetic commentaries scrawled on canvas, gave me many ideas for a piano cycle in four parts.

Twombly’s *Quattro Stagioni* paintings are mercurial and spontaneous. His vibrant, bold colors are applied with a variety of techniques, and are combined with hand painted text fragments in an almost improvisatory way. The musical canvas of Lim’s *The Four Seasons* uses similarly variegated sound colors and textures. The work’s protean character reflects the changing and changeable seasons. Its four movements can be heard as grand meditations on the divisions of the year, on the earth’s natural cycle. Like Twombly’s four paintings, each movement encompasses and reflects on the diverse character of a season: its weather, appearance and spirit. The composer

likens the atmospheric fluctuations of climate to varying emotional states:

These ‘seasons’ are seasons of an inner life – they are made up of ‘climates of feeling’ – weather patterns that are sometimes extravagantly baroque in expression or shot through with an elegiac sense of the passage of time.

Thus, the work’s virtuosic demands are as much aesthetic as they are technical: the piece shifts rapidly between expressive states, between “extravagant” and “elegiac,” at turns exuberant and introspective. The final movement is subtitled “Sema,” the name for the traditional Sufi whirling dance of worship, essentially a musical communion with the creator. The energetic rhythms of the dance yield, toward the end of the movement, to a series of bell-like repeated notes, while the harmony is distilled to only a few chords. The regular uninterrupted chiming of the work’s closing measures reminds us that the seasons have now come full circle; they may now begin anew. *The Four Seasons* was written for pianist Marilyn Nonken, who reprises the piece this evening, and was premiered at the *Musica Nova* festival in Helsinki in February of this year.

Karim Al-Zand

