

Left Bank Concert Society
Saturday, December 13, 2008

Notes on the program by Bonnie Jo Dopp

Elliott Carter (b. December 11th, 1908)

Two Thoughts About the Piano: Caténaïres and Intermittances
Two Diversions

Our December concert opens with piano music from American composer Elliott Carter, who celebrates his 100th birthday this month. He wrote his own notes on the pieces.

Intermittances (2005)

The many meanings silences can express in musical discourse challenged me to use some of them in *Intermittences*. This title was suggested by “Intermittences du Coeur,” one of the chapters in Marcel Proust’s novel [*À la recherche du temps perdu*—known in English as *In Search of Lost Time* and *Remembrance of Things Past*]. It is a short work that also uses many different piano sounds to convey its expressive meanings. It was co-commissioned by the Carnegie Hall Corporation and The Gilmore International Keyboard Festival for Peter Serkin.

Caténaïres (2006)

When Pierre-Laurent Aimard, who performs so eloquently, asked me to write a piece for him, I became obsessed with the idea of a fast, one-line piece with no chords. It became a continuous chain of notes using different spacings, accents, and colorings to produce a wide variety of expression.

Two Diversions (1999)

Two Diversions was an idea of Ursula Oppens. Oppens decided that Carnegie Hall should commission composers to write what they considered easy pieces, and to make an album for piano students, and so I wrote two pieces for this album. I don’t think they are as easy as they had hoped, but ... some people [submitted] even harder ones.

These *Two Diversions* for piano deal with a growing contrast between simultaneous musical ideas. The first *Diversion* presents a line of paired notes (musical intervals) that maintain a single speed throughout, while the other very changeable materials use many different speeds and characters. The second *Diversion* contrasts two musical lines, one of which, on the whole, grows slower and slower while the other grows faster and faster. With these musical ideas about diverging materials, I hope I have written diverting music.

Laura Elise Schwendinger (b. 1962)

High Wire Act (2005)

for flute, violin, viola, cello, and piano

The composer writes:

High Wire Act was commissioned and premiered by Christina Jennings, Matt Dane, and their wonderful Oklahoma City ensemble BrightMusic. It was inspired by the wire circus figures of Alexander Calder, with each movement a character portrait of its title.

In the first movement, *High Wire Act*, we hear alternation between the fast-moving figures of the trapeze artists and the longer overlapping, interruptive lines in string harmonics, which represent the trapeze apparatus.

In *Tightrope-Walker*, the lines are long and nearly static. There are several moments where the music is allowed to grow and blossom. Inevitably, the music culminates in the highest tessitura of the ensemble.

The *Aerialist* starts with a flash of motion in all instruments but lands in an expressive and arching love song between the flute and viola, accompanied by the support of a ‘veil’ of shimmering string harmonics.

Trapped Bird highlights the virtuosity of the flutist, whose music aurally depicts a bird trapped under a circus tent, fighting for free ‘flight.’

Troupe Finale reprises material from the first movement, but now in a more active and virtuosic setting, without interruption. It is a short, yet rousing *Finale*.

Laura Elise Schwendinger is an Associate Professor of Composition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is also the Artistic Director of the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California Berkeley, where she studied with Andrew Imbrie, Olly Wilson and John Thow. She has also been an Associate Professor of Composition and Theory at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a lecturer at the Music Department of the University of California, Santa Cruz, Smith College, and on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music-Preparatory Division, where she started a program for young composers. Her many honors include fellowships and commissions from the Guggenheim Foundation (2008) and the Koussevitzky and Fromm foundations. She has been invited to present her music to composition seminars both nationally and internationally, including those at Harvard University, major universities in California and Illinois, and the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, Ireland’s foremost music education institution.

Dominick Argento (b. 1927)

Six Elizabethan Songs (1962)

for soprano, flute, oboe, harpsichord, violin, and cello

Dominick Argento’s 1957 version of *Six Elizabethan Songs* for tenor and piano was revised by the composer in 1962 for soprano and Baroque ensemble. Argento, who says he prefers the version for Baroque ensemble, writes:

Elizabethan Songs – the very first work I composed upon finishing graduate school – has turned out to be my most performed piece. ... I’ve been informed that the songs are required repertory for voice majors in Canadian music schools, which to me is more significant than winning the Pulitzer Prize. ... The songs are called ‘Elizabethan’ because the lyrics are drawn from that rich period in literature, while the music is in the spirit (if not the manner) of the great English composer-singer-lutenist John Dowland.

The main concern is the paramount importance of the poetry and the primacy of the vocal line over a relatively simple and supportive accompaniment.

Dominick Argento is renowned for his vocal music, having written thirteen operas, many choral works, and several song cycles, including *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. Though he has spent much of his career in Minnesota (where, he says, “the art I practice is widely viewed as an essential aspect of life, not merely an ornament or an embellishment”), Argento has ties to the US Mid-Atlantic region. He was born in York, Pennsylvania, and received music degrees from Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, where he met his wife, soprano Carolyn Bailey Argento. After her death in 2006, Washington DC’s Cathedral Choral Society commissioned his *Evensong: Of Love and Angels*, which was given its premiere at the National Cathedral in March 2008.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Verklärte Nacht, Op. 4 (1899)

for two violins, two violas, and two cellos

Programmatically based on a five-part poem by Schoenberg contemporary Richard Dehmel, this late-Romantic/early-Modern string sextet is considered Schoenberg’s earliest instrumental masterpiece. *Transfigured Night* is his most frequently performed creation (along with its 1917 string orchestra arrangement), though Schoenberg reminds us, “It shall not be forgotten that this work, at its first performance in Vienna, was hissed and caused riots and fist fights.”

The structure of Dehmel’s poem, which is inscribed at the head of the score to *Verklärte Nacht*, is 1) a six-line description of a man and woman who have recently met going for a moonlit walk in the ‘bare, cold woods;’ 2) a twelve-line narration where she tells him she’s pregnant by choice but wishes she’d met him first; 3) a four-line description of her stumbling along not quite knowing where to look after this confession; 4) an eleven-line narration where he says her radiant condition makes him feel warm and childlike himself; 5) a three-line description where they embrace and their environment is transfigured into a ‘high, clear night.’

People have argued the structure of this work from many sides, some of them working sonata procedures into their analyses, some concentrating more on non-sonata-form thematic and harmonic material. Twenty-something Schoenberg would soon launch into what we now term his ‘atonal’ period, but this work is ‘spun’ from what Walter Frisch calls a distinctive “web of harmonic or tonal relationships.” Put simply, it ‘transfigures’ D minor into D major over a span of more than three hundred measures: the final 80 measures can be considered a coda.

Our best approach to hearing this work is probably to heed the composer’s advice to recognize that “it offers the possibility to be appreciated as ‘pure’ music.” He even went so far as to advise that we “forget the poem” and enjoy the portrayal of nature (woods at night) and human feeling (from confession to acceptance, loneliness to love) at the heart of his effort in this work.

For further exploration:

Carter:

The Carnegie Hall Millennium Piano Book, which contains Carter's *Two Diversions* along with works by nine other living composers, was published by Boosey & Hawkes in 2000. It contains a CD recording with Ursula Oppens playing all the pieces in the book and is available in lending libraries via interlibrary loan.

Frank Oteri's essay on the 'Carter Century' is posted at http://www.carter100.com/long_view.html

Schwendinger:

Main web page: <http://www.lauraschwendinger.com/>

University of Wisconsin faculty page:

http://www.music.wisc.edu/faculty/bio?faculty_id=49

For online images to a Whitney Museum (New York City) exhibition that includes Calder's Circus until February 15th see <http://www.whitney.org/www/calder/images.jsp>

Argento:

Dominick Argento writes of his life and works in *Catalogue Raisonné As Memoir: A Composer's Life*, published in 2004 by the University of Minnesota Press.

For online notes to an album of '20th-century Baroque' music that includes *Six Elizabethan Songs* as well as a work by Elliot Carter, see: <http://www.dramonline.org/albums/20th-century-baroque/notes>

Schoenberg:

For more on pre-twelve-tone Schoenberg, read Walter Frisch's *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg, 1893-1908* (1993, University of California Press), available in lending libraries.

Arnold Schoenberg's own program note for *Transfigured Night* is posted here: http://www.schoenberg.org/6_archiv/music/works/op/compositions_op4_programnotes_e.htm

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Bonnie Jo Dopp (MLS, MM) is Librarian Emerita from the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library at the University of Maryland. She has been writing about music for more than thirty years. Her substantial reviews of classical music books and video recordings have appeared in *American Music*, *Notes*, and *Educational Media Reviews Online*. In addition to writing for individual concerts and recitalists, she has annotated programs for the Theater Chamber Players, the Fairfax Symphony, and the Left Bank Concert Society. A member of the Music Library association, the American Musicological Society, and the Music Critics Association of North America, her article, "Numerology and Cryptography in the Music of Lili Boulanger: The Hidden Program in *Clairières dans le ciel*," (*The Musical Quarterly*, 1994) won the Pauline Alderman prize from the

International Alliance for Women in Music for being the most important journal article about women in music for its time period. Bonnie lives with her husband, Peter Hurley, in Florida and Maryland. She may be reached at BJDmusic@aol.com.