

Left Bank Concert Society
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Steinway Series, McEvoy Auditorium
Sunday, February 8, 2009, 3 PM

Notes on the program by Bonnie Jo Dopp

Eric Ewazen (b. 1954)

Trio for Trumpet, Violin, and Piano (1992)

Southern Music, publisher of Eric Ewazen's *Trio for Violin, Trumpet and Piano* (commissioned by Chris Gekker, who first performed it at the Juilliard School in February of 1994), describes it as a substantial work of identifiably strong rhythm and harmonic character whose outer movements cadence in D major, the middle two in E. The muted 'marimba-like' violin shimmer at the start of the third movement, doubled and echoed at the octave by the piano, is but one of its many finely calculated sonorities.

The composer has written, "Using the Brahms Horn Trio as a model, with its rich combination of a string instrument, a brass instrument, and piano, my *Trio* alternates melodic material between the two solo instruments with the piano providing a resonant accompaniment. Traditionally, the trumpet has provided composers with bright, brilliant sonorities, often used heroically or dramatically. In this work, the expressive lyrical qualities of the instrument are also emphasized, helping display its full range of coloristic possibilities. The work opens peacefully and elegiacally. Although intimations of dramatic tension appear, they ultimately fade away into serenity. The second movement is dynamic and intense, with agitated gestures, ostinato patterns, abrupt shifts in rhythm, sudden silences and a general feeling of excitement permeating the music. The Adagio is an introspective ballade. The trumpet sings a melancholy song as the violin and piano provide a background of contrasting harmonic textures. Occasionally they sing out their own intimate melodies, but the trumpet's voice keeps coming back in variations of its own quiet soliloquy. The finale is a joyous dance, filled with lively gestures and rhythms. A brief recollection of the first movement gives way to complete exhilaration as the music spins to a rousing close."

The Trio has most recently been recorded on Albany Records by University of Maryland colleagues Chris Gekker, David Salness, and Rita Sloan.

Eric Ewazen (B.M., Eastman School of Music, M.M. and D.M.A., The Juilliard School) studied with Milton Babbitt, Samuel Adler, Warren Benson, Joseph Schwantner and Gunther Schuller. He has received numerous composition awards and prizes. Commissions include "Legacy," for the bicentennial of West Point and performed by the USMA Band in Carnegie Hall and "Flight," for the USAF Heritage of America Band at Langley AFB, VA, celebrating the 100th anniversary of powered flight. He was also commissioned to write a Trumpet Concerto, "Danzante," for Allen Vizzutti, first performed in Reno, NV in March 2004 by the Intercollegiate Wind Ensemble. He has been a guest at almost 100 Universities and colleges throughout the world in recent years. He has lectured at the New York Philharmonic's Musical Encounters Series and has served as Vice-President of the League of Composers International Society of

Contemporary Music, and Composer-In-Residence with the Orchestra of St. Luke's in New York City. He has been a faculty member at Juilliard since 1980.

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Études pour piano – premier livre (1985)
selections

Beginning in 1985, György Ligeti wrote eighteen piano etudes, published in three 'books.' The works on our program are from the first of these volumes, which received the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition (University of Louisville, 1986).

Hungarian Ligeti was always generous in naming 'influences' on his work. In the case of piano pieces, jazz pianists Bill Evans and Thelonius Monk, African rhythms, (including the work of American composer Steve Reich), computer music, and pieces written for player piano by Conlon Nancarrow all contributed to his ideas. Ligeti biographer Paul Griffiths says Ligeti's etudes display things that the composer "discovered in the piano," including "acrobatic harmonies that gambol and walk on stilts, evading capture by regular keys and modes."

Étude 2, "Cordes à vide" ('open strings') is a study in intervals of fifths – the title refers to how string instruments are tuned.

Étude 5, "Arc-en-ciel" ('rainbow') seems to trace the shape of its namesake in its range of tones and volume, heard through a scrim of sun-sparkled raindrops.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 17 (1917)

Béla Bartók was the first major composer of the 20th century to brave the string quartet genre six times. All half dozen are still in the repertoire.

Bartók worked longer on his second string quartet than on any of the others: from sometime in 1915 to its completion sometime in 1917, during the second and third years of World War I. Its premiere was in Budapest in March 1918. Published in 1920, it was first heard in the US three years later in a concert sponsored by the International Composers' Guild (founded in 1921 by Edgard Varèse).

The Quartet is in three movements:

Moderato

This slow opening sonata movement emphasizing intervals of minor seconds and perfect and augmented fourths (tritones), can be thought of as more or less in an A major/minor and F-sharp minor "tonal atmosphere," though steady tonality is not the composer's intent here. Larry J. Solomon has shown that via a process known as compound variation, Bartók manages to transform the main theme in measures 2 to 5 from a highly chromatic one involving triplets and intricate rhythm into a smooth A-minor statement, 150 measures later. Think of word games that challenge us to turn 'Hate' into 'Love' one letter at a time, always creating a real word at each step. This is Bartók's careful procedure as he presents here, in Solomon's words, "no less than a metamorphosis similar to that of the caterpillar into a butterfly."

Allegro molto capriccioso

This Rondo (Scherzo) movement was probably influenced by the music Bartók heard and made note of when he went to Biskra (in Algeria) for three weeks during the hot summer of 1913. An English traveler named S. H. Leeder had gone there a few years earlier; his book describing Biskra gives us an idea of what Bartók may have experienced. Leeder reported hearing a musical group chanting passages from the Koran in minor key with “flutes and drums (played with the fingers) answering each verse with a sort of refrain.” Leeder speaks elsewhere of nightlife enlivened by “weirdly exciting music of hautboys and drums.” He devotes an entire chapter to dancing dervishes, frequently using the word ‘frenzy’ to describe what he witnessed.

This movement, whose main interval is that of a major/minor third, appears to echo similar musical scenes. It is structured something like a chant-and-refrain, with continually varied repetitions of the rhythmic response adding to the excitement. A central segment calling for “more tranquil” and “less tranquil” alternating passages could be imagined as an oboe-drum face-off. By the final *Prestissimo* coda things have certainly come to a frenzied state, whether or not Bartók had dervishes in mind. Some of Bartók’s music has been described as ‘imaginary folk music.’ Though he never admitted he had Arab music in mind when he wrote this movement, we can imagine that he did.

Lento

This quasi-sonata contrasts greatly with the energy of the opening Allegro. It brings back material from the first movement, but changes its character so greatly that we do not feel we have truly returned. In her essay on the string quartets, Amanda Bayley quotes Bartók as saying, “You have probably noticed that I lay great emphasis on the work of technical development, that I do not like to repeat a musical thought identically and that I never bring back a single detail exactly as it was the first time. This treatment stems from my inclination towards variation and transformation of themes.” If the first movement of this Quartet is all about ‘transformation of themes,’ the final one lets the ear linger so long and quietly on a succession of them that we could describe it as an exercise in ‘contemplation of themes.’ Many people hear desolation and despair in its intensity. Melodies containing successive fourths and fifths as they do in this movement may well have been inspired by Hungarian folk music that the composer had gathered on many field trips and would not continue to collect after 1918. Perhaps this movement, composed during the middle years of a savage world war, is a high-art lament for the loss of an entire peasant way of life.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Quintet in G Minor, Op. 57 (1940)

Since its first performance in January 1934, Dmitri Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* had enjoyed great success and had made its young composer famous. However, after Stalin saw it in 1936, *Pravda*, the newspaper voice of Soviet communism, published an article severely critical of *Lady Macbeth*. Such heavy condemnation of Shostakovich followed that he felt forced to abandon his fourth symphony. His fifth symphony in 1937, associated with the phrase “a Soviet artist’s creative response to just criticism,” was successful; although he wrote a sixth symphony the following year, he was mainly occupied with smaller musical projects and teaching in

the years immediately following his ‘rehabilitation’ and before the Nazi invasion of Russia.

The 1938 Moscow premiere of his first string quartet featured the Beethoven Quartet, four graduates of the Moscow Conservatory who formed a close bond with Shostakovich. Over the years they premiered most of his fifteen quartets, two of which were dedicated to them as a group and four to its individual members. Since the composer was a pianist, the idea of his writing a piano quintet for all of them to play together was a natural one. They gave the work its first performance on November 23rd, 1940 at the Moscow Conservatory. It was immediately acclaimed a masterpiece and it remains one of the composer’s most popular creations. In 1941, the Quintet won Shostakovich the first of his many Stalin Prizes, worth a considerable amount of cash. (The prize honored achievements in the arts and sciences that were deemed to advance the country or socialism.) Shostakovich continued performing the piece until his health forced him to retire from playing the piano in public in the 1960s.

The Quintet is in five movements:

Prelude: Lento - Poco più mosso - Lento

If Shostakovich felt he had to take refuge in older forms in order to survive, he could also reinterpret them and thrive as a creator of new music. Baroque organ preludes often begin with a resounding chord followed by scalar passages; this three-part prelude opens that way, with an impassioned eight measures in G minor on the piano. The strings follow in imitation, then engage in a short dialogue with the piano, ending with a Picardy third – a major triad on G. The B section, *Poco più mosso* is lighter and contrapuntal, often with a staccato bass accompaniment in the piano (pizzicato/staccato sharpness is everywhere in this work, like static interference – possibly a musical commentary on Soviet meddling in art, or, far better, on how a clever artist can *use* such intrusion). The concluding *Lento* is a heavy version of the opening, including the major-key ending. Much of what follows in the Quintet is built from elements in the Prelude.

Fugue: Adagio

Asked to name a typical Baroque musical form, most music lovers would not hesitate to say, “Fugue.” Here in the Quintet’s longest movement, thematic motifs from the first movement provide the subject of a five-voice fugue in G minor. Muted strings present the subject, then a soft-voiced piano enters in its low register. Midway through the movement, chords and themes from the Prelude reappear, and a kaleidoscope of thematic restatements and tonalities ensues.

Scherzo: Allegretto

A violinist who saw Shostakovich perform the Piano Quintet in the 1940s and 50s commented on “his sarcastic, dry staccato” in this scherzo, which “uses the upper register of the piano like a xylophone.” Scherzos are 19th-century inventions with antecedents in the refined three-quarter time Minuet-and-trio. In Shostakovich’s stomping dance, first the piano stars while the strings accompany. After some fractious adventures in harmony, the first violin introduces the ‘trio’ section with a folk-like melody over the piano’s rhythmic insistence. The A section returns in modified, but no less energetic form and the movement ends in a coda with Slavic, perhaps meant to be heard as menacing, 7/4 accents. Louts with muddy boots messing up the ballroom?

Intermezzo: Lento

By the 19th century, intermezzos, which had earlier been light opera pieces, became movements of large instrumental works that could stand on their own. (One of Shostakovich's last public piano performances was of this Intermezzo from the Quintet.) Perhaps because of their origins in vocal music, later intermezzi usually featured melodious lyricism. This one opens with strings alone – a pizzicato cello steadily walking under a singing melody in the first violin. The viola joins and then the piano takes over with the melody in its upper register and a staccato accompaniment in the left hand, then switching to right hand staccato chords and bass line melody in octaves. At the repeat of the opening violin melody, the staccato accompaniment is now in the basement of the piano and intensity grows before everybody quietly fades away into the last movement without a break.

Finale: Allegretto

Emitting an aura of serene gravity, here a minor-key lullaby is interrupted by a second subject that would have been recognized in Russia as a quotation from music traditionally used to greet the entrance of clowns at the circus. These two ideas – one rocking, one rollicking – develop fairly traditionally in sonata form, with a single recollection of a motive from the intermezzo. The Quintet ends quietly, with muted strings and a *pp* dynamic in the piano.

For further exploration:

Ewazen:

Eric Ewazen's website address is <http://www.ericewazen.com/new/index.php>

Ligeti:

György Ligeti by Paul Griffiths, 2nd edition (1997 Robson Books) is available in lending libraries.

Bartók:

Amanda Bayley, "The String Quartets and works for chamber orchestra," chapter 10 in *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), available in lending libraries.

A virtual exhibition on Bartók by the Bartók Archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute for Musicology is here:

<http://www.zti.hu/bartok/exhibition/main.htm>

Larry J. Solomon's analysis of the first movement of the second quartet is posted online here: http://solomonsmusic.net/Bartok2Q_compound_var.htm

About Bartók's Biskra:

To see online photographs of Biskra from about a hundred years ago, shortly before Bartók visited, go to

<http://www.eden-algerie.com/photos/category.php?cat=1&num=6>

S. H. Leeder's 1910 book *The Desert Gateway: Biskra and Thereabouts* is in the public domain and has been put online at

<http://www.archive.org/stream/desertgatewaybis00leed>

Shostakovich:

Much that has been written in English about Shostakovich's life and music remains controversial and inconclusive. Elizabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (1994, Princeton University Press) is filled with verbatim statements about Shostakovich from people who knew him, resulting in a fully three-dimensional portrait of the composer and his milieu. In a 1995 review, musicologist Malcolm Hamrick Brown said, "Simply put, it is indispensable for anyone interested in Shostakovich, or in Soviet culture and society generally....I have studied Soviet music for some forty years. No other book exposes so much of the personal tissue of Soviet musical life as this one." The book is available in lending libraries.

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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.