



Palimpsest

Music from New York

November 16, 2011 / 7 pm / Conrad Prebys Concert Hall / UCSD Department of Music

Wednesdays@7

Conductor: Steven Schick (Feldman)

Soprano: Tiffany DuMouchelle

Guitar: Pablo Gomez

Mandolin: Scott Wolf

Harp: Tasha Smith

Violin: Batya MacAdam-Somer

Allison Roush (Feldman)

Kate Hatmaker (Hembree)

Viola: Gareth Zehngut

Cello: Ashley Walters

Jennifer Bewerse (Feldman)

Bass: Scott Worthington

Flute: Berglind Tómasdóttir

Oboe: Sarah Skuster

Clarinet: Curt Miller

Bassoon: David Savage

Trumpet: Calvin Price

Horn: Nicolee Kuester

Trombone: Eric Star

Piano:

Stephen Lewis (Babbitt, Feldman)

William Fried (Wolpe, Hembree)

Brendan Nguyen (Feldman)

Percussion:

Dustin Donahue (Carter, Feldman)

Steve Solook (Wolpe, Hembree)

Leah Bowden (Feldman)

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Aleck Karis, Conductor

Chamber Piece No. 2 for thirteen players (1967) Stefan Wolpe (1902-72)

Luimen (1997) Elliott Carter (1908-)
Trumpet, Trombone, harp, Mandolin, Guitar, and Vibraphone

Cantiones sine Textu (2001) Mario Davidovsky (1934-)
Soprano, Flute, Clarinet, Guitar and Contrabass

Nimbus (2011) [World Premiere] Paul Hembree (1982-)
Chamber Orchestra

intermission

Arie Da Capo (1974) Milton Babbitt (1916-2011)
Flute, Clarinet, Violin, Violoncello, Piano

Between Categories (1969) Morton Feldman (1926-87)
Piano, Chimes, Violin and Violoncello (2 of each instrument)

Chamber Piece No. 2 for thirteen players (1967) Stefan Wolpe

Welcome to our first Palimpsest concert of the 2011-12 season. This concert features music by five masters all associated with New York City, and also continues the Palimpsest tradition of commissioning new works in the instrumentation of older ones, with the premiere of *Nimbus* by Paul Hembree, a graduate student in our department.

The five "New York" composers featured tonight share more than a city. They all expressed deep love and understanding for the Western tonal and modal musical canon, yet none of them uses tonality. They all studied 12-tone techniques, but among them only Babbitt was a serial composer, though Wolpe adopted some serial techniques. They all ambitiously committed themselves to advancing the course of Western music, and were influential teachers. Babbitt taught Davidovsky, Wolpe taught Feldman - though Feldman of course aligned himself more with Cage, Brown and Wolff - more "downtown" than "uptown". In the 70's and 80's the line between "uptown" and "downtown" in New York could seem like a battle line; the freelance musicians playing this music, of which I was one, did not feel so doctrinaire as the composers did. What I find most striking about these five figures is the fact that each created a totally original sound-world, one demanding a particular kind of virtuosity as well as understanding from the players who live in it.

Wolpe's *Chamber Piece No. 2* is a bit of a tease at only 4 minutes, which is why we will perform it twice, as a fanfare and a valedictory. It is a good example of the composer's high-energy late style, tightly constructed yet improvisatory in its rapidly shifting moods and colors. Wolpe arrived in NY in 1938, coming from Palestine, and before that Austria (where he studied with Webern) and Berlin (where he studied at the Bauhaus). In the 50's he was friendly with Charlie ("Bird") Parker, whom he called "Vogel"; some may hear a bebop influence in this work's angular lines and syncopations.

Stefan Wolpe was beloved by his students, colleagues, and the performers who worked with him – one of whom told me: "he heard *everything*." The comments made on the occasion of his death (from Parkinson's Disease) by Carter and Babbitt say as much about the writers as they do about Wolpe himself.

Babbitt: "For the composer, there is no puzzle in 'the relation of music to life,' for music is of life, of his life, and Stefan's music was, and is, passionately and singularly his life, for each individual work replicated his sense of life, his sense of a musical composition's life, the form of a total life in process, in progress, ever-evolving, ever-developing, ever-mutating, yet ever reflecting the character of the idea at the kernel of the work, the character of the man at the heart of the work: his musical imagination, his musical intelligence, his musical courage, his human courage."

Carter: "Comet-like radiance, conviction, fervent intensity, penetrating thought on many levels of seriousness and humor, combined with breathtaking adventurousness and originality marked the inner and outer life of Stefan Wolpe, as they do his compositions....His music, to me, unequivocally expresses his deeply felt conviction about the values of art and life – makes them immediately graspable – a most inspiring thing in these unencouraging times."

Carter's *Luimen* displays many of the qualities Carter ascribed to Wolpe's music. That this vibrant, colorful score, with its mercurial shifting moods and tempi, was written by a 99-year-old is a wonderful thing. Hearing it makes it easier to comprehend the fact that Carter is still composing, as he approaches his 103rd birthday in December.

Carter's note for *Luimen*:

For a number of years I had been thinking of writing a piece based on the sound of plucked instruments like the mandolin, guitar, and harp, so when the Nieuw Ensemble asked me for a piece I realized that this group had excellent players of these three instruments to which I added trumpet, trombone and vibraphone and composed a one movement fantasy whose title was chosen by the Ensemble (meaning 'moods'). The score opens with a fast movement during which the mandolin picks out a line of short notes. A guitar solo [essentially Carter's solo guitar piece, *Shard*] accompanied by the group follows and the work concludes with a coda for the sextet. The music was composed during the early summer of 1997 in Southbury, Connecticut.

Davidovsky first came to the US from his native Argentina in 1958 as a Koussevitzky fellow at the Berkshire (later Tanglewood) Music Center. He settled in New York in 1960, where he has remained except for a relatively brief stay in Boston while he taught at Harvard. Through his involvement with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, as a member of the Columbia composition faculty and as the longtime director of the Wellesley Composers' Conference, he has had a strong influence on several generations of composers.

Cantiones sine textu was inspired by the 16th century *ricercare* of the same name by Orlando di Lasso, 2-part contrapuntal music without text and without specific instrumentation. Davidovsky imagined the soprano part embedded in the ensemble, blending with and coloring the timbres of the instruments around it, and also unifying them. He has spoken of color and articulation as having an elevated status in his music, to the point where they become formal elements comparable to that of harmony in an earlier tonal context. As a pioneer in electronic music, Davidovsky is well known for his series of "Synchronisms" for solo instruments or ensembles with electronics, and the influence of his electronic music can be heard in the technical demands this piece: split-second synchronicity and lightning fast changes in color and texture.

Paul Hembree writes the following about *Nimbus*:

Physical processes and the natural sublime reliably serve as stimulants when I compose, and I suppose that these sources of inspiration are rather traditional in most of the arts. Remnants of this tradition may seem banal now; for instance, the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School are respectable, but do not strike us with the same power they once did.

However, I think this tradition is periodically refreshed with new windows provided by science into the operation of natural phenomena. Examples of this are Gerhard Richter's oppressive mural *Strontium* (2005), or any of Iannis Xenakis's works with arborescences, such as *Lichens* (1983) or *Jonchaies* (1977). For me, these new windows are often merely evocative, but sometimes the revealed physical processes suggest specific compositional techniques.

Nimbus has a dual meaning; in meteorological literature it is a type of precipitation-bearing cloud, but in religious iconography it is another word for a halo or aureole, usually surrounding a holy figure or deity. One can easily imagine a combination of these definitions. Many of the textures in this piece are composed of vaporous filaments with a glowing, leading edge. Juxtaposed masses of these filaments are buffeted along at different speeds, as are the constituent members within each mass. Diverging masses dissipate atmospherically, while the tumult of converging masses leads toward an incisive outburst.

Milton Babbitt wrote *Arie da Capo* for the Da Capo Chamber Players, but the title carries many meanings, as is often the case with Babbitt. Each of its five "arias" has its own "da capo" or summing up, and in a broader sense this is music of "the head" by a composer whose braininess could be at times intimidating – though never to the musicians he worked with. He reminded me of descriptions of Samuel Johnson: learned, deep, yet always witty and sociable. The musical thinker who developed the time-point system, applying serial techniques to rhythm, also wrote the sequel to *Sextets* for violin and piano and called it *The Joy of More Sextets*. When I told him about my enthusiasm for teaching 16th century species counterpoint, and compared him to Palestrina, he shot back "but I'm not Catholic". Carter likened him to a different early master in recognition of his enormous influence as a theorist, writing of his "Rameau-like contribution....to the clarification and ordering of the twelve-tone method." Carter continues in the same essay:

...to be so brilliant and articulate an expounder and developer of music theory in print and in lectures has threatened to draw attention away from his most important work, his compositions....Very striking is the strong sense of integration in his work, its overpowering concentration on the particular premises of any given work...In all his work the originality of conception and the fastidiousness with which he avoids familiar musical devices have been most intriguing and attractive. Such novel ways of musical thinking can be, of course, perplexing at first, especially when performers lack an imaginative grasp of what they are playing, but it is a perplexity that disappears at later, better performances, although like many good modern works his do not lose their mysterious originality.

Each of the five "arias" in *Arie da Capo* features a different instrument, in the following order: clarinet, cello, flute, violin and piano. Babbitt transforms the set differently in each as

well, affecting its overall character (for instance, the second aria abounds in wide-spaced octaves). The predominance of the “solo” instrument is subtle; in Babbitt’s words, “Within its own aria, the central instrument dominates less quantitatively than relationally, in that its music is the immediate source of, and is complemented and counterpointed by, the music of the “accompanying” instruments.” In the lively discourse of this piece, the lead instrument does not necessarily play louder than the others. The first-time listener will be aided in recognizing the changing arias by the fact the clarinetist switches to bass clarinet for the second and fourth of them, so each new section is signaled by the clarinetist changing instruments.

Feldman wrote of his fascination with the space “between time and space, between painting and music, between the construction of music and its surface”. Feldman wrote many musical scores in graphic notation in the 50’s and 60’s, works which can be appreciated as visual art. There followed many conventionally notated works, but also scores like this one, which fall between these two categories, with sections that are metrically notated (and conducted, in this performance) alternating with unmetred sections. These un-conducted sections in turn fall into two categories, one with note values that can be counted, the other with strictly spatial rhythmic notation; note-heads only. The two quartets share the same instrumentation. They also share some musical elements, the most striking of which are a recurring rolled piano chord, and a series of A flat harmonics in the strings; mostly they play independently of one another.

It is interesting to contemplate the relationship between Wolpe and Feldman, who wrote, “I must have had a secret desire to leave this dream-like attitude to music [studying with Willingford Riegger], and to become a “musician”, because at eighteen I found myself with Stefan Wolpe. But all we did was argue about music and felt I was learning nothing. One day I stopped paying him. Nothing was said about it. I continued to go, we continued to argue, and we are still arguing eighteen years later”. Feldman also wrote: “Unlike so many composers, especially of his era, he didn’t question my ideas or extol any systems for me to use. I’m thankful for this, since at that time I remember I was dangling between various procedures that I knew didn’t apply to my music.”

--Note by Aleck Karis

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A black and white photograph of the San Diego skyline at night, with city lights reflecting on the water in the foreground. The skyline includes several prominent skyscrapers, some with illuminated windows and signs.

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