

Stephen Lewis, piano
Chamber Recital
4:30 PM, Sunday, April 6th, 2014
Conrad Prebys Music Center Concert Hall

PROGRAM

Of Challenge and of Love (1994)

Elliott Carter (1908-2012)

1. High on our Tower
2. Under the Dome
3. *Am Klavier (at the Piano)*
4. Quatrains from Harp Lake
5. End of a Chapter

Tiffany Du Mouchelle, soprano

Trio in B major, Op. 8 (1854; revised 1889)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Scherzo: Allegro molto
- III. Adagio
- IV. Allegro

Batya Macadam-Somer, violin
Jennifer Bewerse, cello

INTERMISSION

Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (1937)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

- I. Assai lento - Allegro troppo
- II. Lento, ma non troppo
- III. Allegro non troppo

Kyle Adam Blair, piano
Stephen Solook, percussion
Dustin Donahue, percussion

NOTES

Elliott Carter's "**Of Challenge and of Love**" (1994) is a song cycle that sets five poems by John Hollander, composed when Carter was well into his 80s. With this work, Carter softened his complex style somewhat without abandoning his basic rhythmic and harmonic practices. Hollander's text expresses it best:

*Then above that sea of immense complexities
The clear tenor of memory I did not know
I had enters;*

Especially prominent are the lyrical, sustained melodies of the soprano part and the frequent perfect fifths and occasional triads of the piano accompaniment. In composing "Of Challenge and of Love," Carter began with the fourth song, "Quatrains from Harp Lake." Reflecting the poem, this song is the longest and most episodic in its setting. The other songs all spring from one or more of the episodes.

In the revision of his **Trio in B major, Op. 8** (1854; revised 1889), Johannes Brahms brings the young and mature versions of himself into direct contact. The term "revision" hardly does justice to the completely new themes and developments Brahms composed for this work. In the first movement, the heroic (and heroically long) opening theme is left intact from the 1854 version; nothing else is. The second theme, made up of Brahms' recurring descending thirds motive, is taut, concise, balanced, and ambiguous through every musical dimension. The trajectory of this movement is one of reconciliation, with Brahms gradually transforming the 1889 theme into the 1854 theme by the coda. The second movement, in which Brahms seems to channel the capricious spirit of Mendelssohn, is, except for a new coda, in its original form from 1854. Handel and Beethoven are the inspirations for the third movement's original outer sections, depicting a suspension of time. The contrasting middle episode is new to the 1889 version, including a pulsing pedal point reminiscent of his recent D minor Violin Sonata.

The finale in both versions provides the work's greatest surprise: despite beginning in B major, the work ends decisively, tragically in B minor. This formal plan is so atypical of multi-movement works that it calls for extra-musical interpretation. The original version was composed in 1854 - the same year that Brahms' mentor and champion Robert Schumann attempted suicide and was committed to a mental hospital. The audaciously negative ending still appealed to the older Brahms, who had increasingly been given to fatalistic and valedictory musical narratives. The opening theme, always hovering just short of resolving to a stable harmony, was original to the 1854 version. The vigorous second theme is new, and perhaps reflects the occasion of the premiere of the revised version, which took place in Boston; the second theme bears more than a passing resemblance to "The Star-Spangled Banner," although its accompaniment is cast in Brahms' "Hungarian" style.

Béla Bartók's **Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion** (1937) was composed immediately after the Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta. In the manner of the previous work, the Sonata continues Bartók's treatment of the piano as a percussion instrument. Whereas the piano plays a relatively minor role in the MSPC, in the Sonata they predominate. He had already composed passages in both the First and Second Piano Concertos that create dialogues between the piano and various percussion instruments (in the Second, the piano and timpani have a lengthy duet; in the First, the piano completely joins ranks with the percussion in the slow movement). Bartók's complete output for piano from "Allegro Barbaro" onward shows a commitment to exploring the piano's percussive nature; this Sonata is the apotheosis of this approach.

The Sonata shares an overall form similar to that of the MSPC. While the MSPC is in four movement and the Sonata in three, the sequence of slow-fast-slow-fast stays the same. In the Sonata, the first movement begins with a lengthy slow introduction before a transition into the "Allegro troppo." The slow introduction progressively reveals a sinuous nine-note chromatic melody. This is followed by the main motive of the "Allegro troppo" section: a syncopated pulse of repeated notes. The first movement's form is a marriage of the tradition sonata-allegro form with Bartók's "arch" form, in that the recapitulation presents the themes from the exposition in reverse order (visually, it would be represented: A B C Development C B A). This formal approach provides a grounding in tradition and a strong sense of symmetry, but also an amount of unpredictability.

The second movement is an example of Bartók's "night music" style, relatively short and simple compared to the first movement. Especially noteworthy is a melody played softly by the pianos in parallel chords made up of 10 of the 12 chromatic pitches at once. This beautiful, quasi-electronic sound prefigures later music by Olivier Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and many others.

The last movement's clever, witty spirit balances the serious nature of the first movement. Here Bartók rarely challenges the 2/4 meter, instead using frequent tempo changes for variety. The opening melody, played by the xylophone, uses the so-called "acoustic" scale (a major scale with a raised 4th and lowered 7th scale degree). Besides the scale's own character, Bartók also makes frequent use of its two halves, which are a whole-tone scale fragment (C-D-E-F sharp) and an octatonic scale fragment (F sharp-G-A-B flat), as opposing harmonic states. The end of the work fades slowly away, coalescing into a blatant C major chord that rings out over the percussion's last phrase.

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Text for "Of Challenge and of Love":

1. High on our Tower

High on our tower
Where the winds were
Did my head turning
Turn yours,
Or were we burning
In the one wind?

Our wide stares pinned
To a spinning world.
We burned; my head,
Turning to yours
On that white tower,
Whirled high in fire.

All heights are our
Towers of desire;
All shaded spaces
Our valleys, enclosing
Now darkening places
Of unequal repose.

How tower-high were
Our whitest places
Where my head widely
Turned into yours
In the spaces of spinning.
In burning wind!

*How dark and far
Apart valleys are...*

2. Under the Dome

That great, domed chamber, celebrated for its full choir
Of echoes: high among its shadowed vaults they cower
Until called out. What do echoes do when they reply?
Lie, lie, lie about what we cried out, about their own
Helplessness in the face of silence. What do they do
To the clear call that they make reverberate? *Berate*,
Berate it for its faults, its frangible syllables.
But in this dear cave we have discovered on our walks
Even a broken call resounds in all, and wild tales
We tell into the darkness return trimmed into truth.
Our talk goes untaunted: these are the haunts of our hearts,
Where I cry out your name. Hearing and overhearing
My own voice, startled, appalled, instructed, I rejoice.

3. *Am Klavier (at the Piano)*

*The evening light dies down: all the old songs begin
To crowd the soft air, choiring confusedly.
Then above that sea of immense complexities
The clear tenor of memory I did not know
I had enters; like a rod of text held out by
A god of meaning, it governs the high, wayward
Waves of what is always going on in the world.*

*All that becomes accompaniment. And it is
What we start out with now: this is not time
To pluck or harp on antiquities of feeling.
These soft hammers give gentle blows to all their strings,
Blows that strike with a touch of challenge and of love.
Thus what we are, being sung against what we come
To be a part of, rises like a kind of light.*

4. Quatrains from Harp Lake

The thrumming waves of the lost lake had gone
Into some kind of hiding since the spring.
His long yawn ceased to deafen, then switched on
The sixty-cycle hum of everything.

Once we plucked ripened fruit and blossoms all
Together from one branch, humming one note.
Spring from the water, shining fish, then fall
In one unbroken motion into my boat!

The river whistled and the forest sang.
Surprise, then please, that something had gone wrong.
The touches of your hands, your silence, rang
Changes on the dull, joyous bells of song.

They stood tall, loving in the shade: the sunny
Air withdrew from them in a sudden hush.
The strong-arm tactics of the oak? The honey-
Dipped diplomacies of the lilac bush?

In from the cold, her reddened ears were burning
With what the firelight had been saying of her.
This final urn is wordless now, concerning
Her ashes and the ashes of her lover.

Under their phrases, meaninglessness churn'd;
Imprisoned in their whispers lay a yell.
Down here we contemplate the deftly-turned
Newel-posts of the stairway up to hell.

High on the rocks some Ponderosa pins
Must overlook the jagged valley's floor.
What then must one have witnessed to divine
That death was just a side-effect of war?
He'd long since put his feet into that part
Of life from which they could not be withdrawn.
Late blossoms danced, then shook and took to heart
Summer's long shadows falling on the lawn.

Words of pure winter, yet not pinched nor mean:
Blue truth can handle a good deal of gray.
Dulled, but incontrovertibly still green,
The noble laurel holds the cold at bay.

5. End of a Chapter

...But when true beauty does finally come crashing at us
through the stretched paper of the picturesque, we can
wonder how we had for so long been able to remain dis-
tracted from its absence.