

Material, Method

D.M.A Recital: Peter Ko, cello

Thursday, April 7, 2022 - 7:00 p.m.

Conrad Prebys Music Center, Experimental Theater

Pression (1969)

Helmut Lachenmann

glimmer around... (2022)*

Anqi Liu

Intersection 4 (1952)

Morton Feldman

Projection 1 (1950)

Morton Feldman

Durations 2 (1960)

Morton Feldman

Music for Cello and Piano (1955)

Earle Brown

*world premiere

Program Notes

The art featured in my recital graphic, *Untitled* (1982) by Kwon Young-woo, stems from a particular South Korean art movement that emerged in the 1960s. *Dansaekhwa* was a diverse movement, but a common theme was the experimental manipulation of *material* itself, and the *method* the artists engaged in—pushing paint, soaking canvas, dragging pencils, and ripping paper. Rather than it being hidden so as to not distract from a figure of representation, the work, effort, actions of the artists became the center of focus. It was something that particularly struck me the first time I encountered it ... the art and philosophy has remained an interest of mine ever since. In a way, the music of this program is curated in relation to those themes, concerning material and method.

The program can be seen as being organized into three pairs, with *Pression* by Helmut Lachenmann and *glimmer around...* by Anqi Liu forming the first pair. Through the lens of this program, they posit two extremes of material exploration of the cello. *Pression* is primarily concerned with the activation of the cello's structural materials. Materials critical to creating the overall aural result that we perceive as the cello, of rich tonal variety that entices the listener into fantasy—but only if said materials are suppressed from our perception. Through *Pression*, these materials are brought into the spotlight; the sound of the strings as fingers run through them, the bridge, body, and tailpiece as they are bowed and struck. Highlighted, they invite a new world of musical possibilities and expression.

glimmer around... explores the harmonic extremes of the cello, the ethereal, outlying resonances that are often masked by the stronger fundamental tones produced. Anqi maps out an exploration of the 7th, 11th, 13th, 14th and 15th partials—fragile harmonics that can flitter in and out of focus even under the most ideal circumstances. Juxtaposed are manipulations of bow placement, bow pressure, and even finger pressure; all variables often controlled intuitively by the cellist to create an intended “ideal” sound. Yet, in *glimmer around...*, these variables are directed independent of an idealized sounding result, sometimes in paradoxical ways; when followed methodically, it can yield unpredictable, glimmering, complex aural states from the cello beyond imagination.

The two solo pieces by Morton Feldman, *Projection 1* and *Intersection 4*, are composed in unconventional graphic notation, with instructions only specifying the type of sound (arco, pizzicato, harmonic), and the range allowed (high, medium, low), with *Intersection 4* having the additional indication of the amount of sounds in a beat (demanding 13

sounds to be played in one beat at some point!). The precise choice of pitch and realization of these sounds are otherwise left to the performer's discretion.

A key characteristic of these two pieces are the long stretches of silence that span between musical events. I think of these two as treating silence in very different ways; *Projection 1* is luxurious, plush with how the resonances of the cello are allowed to emerge from the silence, soak into the space, and dissipate. In contrast, the silences in *Intersection 4* are electrified, like a live wire; the musical events punctuate the silences with intense, ecstatic flurries of activity.

Morton Feldman's *Durations 2* and Earle Brown's *Music for Cello and Piano* were both influenced and inspired by John Cage's ideas of aleatoric, chance-based music. In *Durations 2*, both performers sustain sounds for the duration that they intuit, with no concern for aligning vertically with one another. In *Music for Cello and Piano*, the piece uses Brown's "time notation" system, which spatially represents sound-relationships independent of a strict pulse or metric system. Although it is notated quite precisely, Brown explicitly recognizes that there will be deviations due to the performers' sense of relativity, and that it is "acceptable and in fact integral to [the work]". I would go so far as to say that the material realities of the instruments sometimes necessitate a distortion in one's sense of time.

One may note similarities to John Cage's *Indeterminacy*, recordings where the listener hears John Cage reading text while David Tudor plays the piano; the catch being that both performers were in separate recording booths when playing simultaneously, unable to hear each other. With these pieces by Feldman and Brown, interactions and simultaneities are serendipitous in nature ... perhaps because of that, they become all the more beautiful and precious. At times, glowing and luxuriant harmonies arise during *Durations 2*, and other times we witness a poignant counterpoint of tones fading away and the sense of their after-sounds.

Music for Cello and Piano sits in stark contrast; one is given the impression that Brown indexed all the possible sounds of both instruments, to his knowledge at the time, and organized the music to showcase that. Intuitively composed, Brown organizes duration, timbre, and dynamic in wildly varied ways, often with maximal contrast. With the component of relative time between the two performers, the composite sound can vacillate between a bombardment of chaotic, irrational whirlwind of sound ... or moments of relative clarity and seemingly contrapuntal organization.