

Merkin Concert Hall Program Notes Links from the Austro-Hungarian Past to New Music

Tonight's program links works of four distinct epochs, each roughly seventy-five years apart. In origin, the music is essentially Austro-Hungarian, with an offshoot that points toward contemporary America. In its own way, each piece uses popular styles and musical riffs of its time, evoking the indigenous instruments and speech that would be readily identifiable. Though of distant eras, the composers share an immediacy with their contemporary genres. Each cultivates this familiarity into timeless art. Quotidian material gets treated with great skill and imagination to create surprise and nuance. For each composer's contemporary audience, challenges to enter unfamiliar territory share the stage with that which is more recognizable. It is not altogether surprising that the more a masterpiece is heard, the easier it is for us to feel acquainted with it. Yet, even an established great work's interplay between its surface and its inner core can surprise us anew. Side by side with music of our time, one can hear what is jarring and fresh in the pieces of the distant past, and what is profoundly wrought in the music of our era.

Though associated with the patrician demeanor of the Court of Esterhazy and its contemporary ethos of a charmed cool and refined classicism, a brief autobiographical sketch from 1776 submitted by **Franz Joseph Haydn** to *Das Gelehrte Oesterreich* nevertheless begins: "I was born anno 1732 the last of March in the hamlet of Rohrau in Lower Austria, near Bruck on the Leytha River. My father was a wheelwright by profession...and had a natural love for music. Without being able to read music he played the harp, and when I was a boy of five I was able to repeat all of his short and simple songs." Haydn's memory of the land and his country-father's "simple songs" are at the core of this greatest composer of musical rhetoric. He infused his melodies with everyday speech-like notions. The musicologist Lázló Somfai's description points us toward Haydn's *Sonata in A Flat* (Hob.46/WU#31): "...opening measures are not primarily rooted in purely musical thinking but rather are a fascinating demonstration of musical rhetoric...Haydn's rhythms, dynamics, embellishments, and extensive use of registral contrasts...declaim with utmost rhythmic freedom and great expressive force." As in the Schubert sonata that closes this program, Haydn's begins with a theme in march rhythm. Marching left-hand gestures figure throughout the movement. The solo voices around the march sing in an impromptu manner that lift the piece from being solely a march to an arresting stream of narration. The gestures are here declarative, there inquisitive, and in the development, elaborate in the manner of Bach. Subtle alterations in direction and note density quickly shift the work from poignancy to startlingness to wit. The Adagio begins with a ground bass pattern in the manner of a Sicillienne. Gradually, layers of beautiful lines multiply the tender intimacy of the left-handed start. There are stops along the way for mini-cadenzas, opportunities for the pianist to improvise from a held chord to new point of departure. The movement keeps adding fresh musical ideas until it closes with an opportunity for the most elaborate of these cadenzas. After the two substantial movements, Haydn closes the Sonata with a "don't blink" finale. It bumps quickly along in high humorous style.

The organic nature of Haydn's "speech music" has a kinship to two Hungarian composers who bracket the 20th century: **Zoltán Kodály** (1882-1967, Budapest) and **György Ligeti** (b. 1923 Transylvania). In this program's examples we hear that the true precursor to the pianoforte is the Cimbalom, the hammer dulcimer, which still prevails in Hungary today. The folk instrument's percussive immediacy is distilled in piano writing that is pliant and rhapsodic. Kodály's *Zongoradarab* (which sounds far more descriptive than its English translation: Piano Pieces) are early attempts to

assert an overt Hungarian style. His aphoristic approach is an interesting response to the vogue of the recent past - works which seemed by their very length to have stretched the end of the nineteenth century. Folk-like attributes in the works of Haydn, Schubert, and Beethoven are here more manifest. Kodály uses his local dialect the way other composers from non-Western European cultures (like America, for instance) would transfigure Western music in the twentieth century. He and Béla Bartók (1881-1945) were pioneering ethnomusicologists, collecting indigenous melodies of neighboring lands. Their efforts to seek diversity were extremely courageous under regimes that codified culture. Perhaps this accounts for the heroic nature of their music. The Kodály op. 3 #2 was heard in America as the accompaniment to Martha Graham's *Lamentation* (1930), her deeply personal solo dance of grief. It is interesting that an American iconoclast found resonance here, in this music of ethnic richness. Ligeti is a composer whose experiments, no matter how far-flung, seem always rooted in music that is joyously vernacular. *Cordes Vides* and *Fanfares* are two selections from *Études Pour Piano* (Book I, 1985). Like most études, each piece sets out to explore one central idea in a myriad of physical and compositional ways. Ligeti wrote: "At the center of my compositional intentions in the *Études* lies a new conception of rhythmic articulation. That which is eminently new in these pieces is the possibility of several simultaneous layers of different tempi." Is it coincidence that the number of letters in these études' titles equal the numerical ideas inherent in the pieces? In *Cordes Vides* (*Empty Strings*) the open fifth of a stringed instrument defines the layered texture. The pulse of the music is divided and fractured, effecting an acceleration. Dedicated to Boulez, the kaleidoscopic suggestions of harmony and expansive architecture are French in manner. In *Fanfares*, a rhythmic pulse, 3+2+3, (a composite rhythm noted by Bartok as Bulgarian in his dances for piano) is maintained on the same pitches in various registers throughout. Imposed over this are brass-like flourishes which pass between the hands, increasingly independent of the basic pulse. One can trace the rhythmic complexity to non-western traditions of Slovakia, India, and Africa. Ligeti's ingenious success at integrating foundations rather than surfaces of world music traditions makes him a central voice in twentieth century music.

Tamar Diesendruck's *Sound Reasoning in the Tower of Babel* is, as the title suggests, a piece about musical language and coherence. Written at a time (the late 1980s) when musical styles were multiplying, but practitioners not always friendly in their opposition, her work strives to find resonance in jarring differences. As she put it, "The story of the Tower of Babel is for me a metaphor for the current musical chaos composers work in. I wished to resolve the din of remembered patterns of generic and personal musical style in a unified flow in which, within an original idiom, various styles co-exist and interact." She populates the piece with musical characteristics inspired by pianist-composers of the past, particularly Chopin, Brahms, Debussy, Bartok, Fats Waller, and Cecil Taylor. The piece is tightly structured, though initially one is struck by a prismatic effect. One finds the heroic chord of a Chopin Polonaise colliding with a Fats Waller-inspired blues riff interrupted by a Debussian treatment of the same notes. At discourse's end, one is left with a singular voice, that of Diesendruck herself. *Sound Reasoning* is the first in a group of five works which can be played in one evening called *Theater of the Ear*. The works, each different in design and surface, are all inspired by the drama, tragedy and mystery of the Tower of Babel story.

Franz Schubert composed his *Sonate in D major* D.850 in the summer of 1825. It is often remarked that Schubert had the gift of spontaneous creation. Many of his best songs are reputed to have been jotted down heatedly on napkins and other nearby scraps. Beginning with a burst of propulsion, one initially hears the joyous explosion of The D Major Sonata's opening as such youthful exuberance. Schubert indeed was

young and praised by his circle of musical friends. Yet the mature depths that develop out of the allegro's brisk repeated chords are astounding. Nothing Schubert sets out in the composition is forgotten - every phrase begets a new idea which, in turn, affects that original idea - from the opening of the entire piece to the close of the last movement. Each successive movement's theme is a variation of the first's opening. But deeper than motivic variation is the way these ideas affect each other in the dramatic scope of the piece. The sonata's march-like start is not so much varied as transmogrified into other states of being. Schubert accumulates his themes like a memoirist assembles experiences. Along the way he plays with timing, projection (music that is sung as opposed to music that is heard) and the common musical genres which were familiar to him and his contemporary audience. In his avant-garde way, Schubert did not write a first movement simply in the style of a galloping march. Rather it is a march which continually quiets and refortifies, gets stuck in foreign keys and tempi, becomes in turn military and playful in the development, and ends as a finale to end all finales. The second movement is an expansive soliloquy which takes its rhythm from a displaced waltz. Hunting horn tropes sound in the distance, and military rhythms from the first movement play an increasing role in the destiny of the recurring opening song. Repeated chords begin to figure again, climaxing in a triumphant C major cry. The combined strata descend in prayerful close. The third movement is a scherzo that is fervently syncopated, furthering the elongated rhythm which evolved in the slow movement. A landler (country waltz) intervenes. The middle section trio is simple and compelling in the manner of Schubert's *Moments Musicaux*. But the insistent return of repeated chords reveal a deeper well of might within this divertissement. The movement eventually dissipates, practically deconstructs, in an untethered high register. The skeletal shell of the scherzo's end begins anew the fourth movement Rondo. The introduced right-hand theme is from one of Schubert's own *Écossaises* (a snappy Scottish dance in 2). There are two intervening episodes: the first exuberant with punctuations of Hungarian dance; the second an intimate and pastoral setting of the first movement repeated chords, with a middle section containing operatic gestures. The final setting of the rondo tune, a coda for the whole work, is in a giddy cut time. Its playfulness is fleeting. The *écossaise* winds down and recedes in the distance.

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