

O (2000)

O, the most recent of these pieces, seems to be at the apogee of an aesthetic trajectory that can be retroactively traced to Ben's earliest compositional work. O is a highly meditative, slow moving organism that demands from its listeners and performer an absolute attention to sonority, as the essential nature of the piano as a decaying sound producer is explored to an extreme. Indeed it is a conspicuous aspect of all of Ben's later piano works: that the piano is treated as an idiosyncratic sonorous soundsource. Thus O does not so much move forward in a forthright way, but rather meanders and takes those keen enough to follow on a dreamlike journey of ever-changing sonorities, touching and recombining all the registers of the piano so that the entire keyboard is always engaged. In these and other not obvious familiar ways, O is a surprisingly demanding work for the performer. Setting whole notes at a very slow tempo requires that the performer not only keep track of localized direction and sonorities, but the larger imagery of phrasing and architecture. Without foresight to see beyond the microcosm, the work has the potential to seem lost within its own boundaries. But there is a silent and growing internal process that empowers the work, and becomes a catalyst for it to move beyond the limitation of the keyboard. By the time of the "coda", this potential materializes, and the final rising dyads seem only the beginning of an unlimited ascent that keeps on speaking beyond the last sounds from the keyboard.

invention (1988; recomposed 2003 in memory of Arthur Berger)

Ben writes: A vignette composed originally for a four-hand suite for Debbie Boling and Regina D'Amico, whose earnest daily duopractice in the room next door to my office at Bard College had already embedded me in their soundworld. The two outer parts were rearrangements of pieces I composed during the 1950s, during and just after my years at Brandeis with Arthur Berger; so to hear Arthur's musical presence recrudescant in the tiny soundflash of *Invention* seems non-nostalgically natural.

("what I could hear,....") (a passage for Roger Sessions) (1979)

As a work that is based around very limited pitch material (only the notes C, D \flat , E \flat , E, and A), *passage for roger sessions* is surprising for the amount of varied thematic and dramatic elements it generates. Whether or not the work seeks to actively portray images of Roger Sessions, or images of anguish, there is an unmistakable play of contrasts, by way of a series of episodes that range from almost operatic melodic lines to a dirge-like chorale section. As with all of Ben's piano music, the importance of variety of touch and timbre is paramount. But in contrast to *O* (a much later work), *passage* is conspicuously about action rather than meditative contemplation: it is obviously Ben's "sturm und drang" piece. With the limited pitch material he is still able to construct a "dramatic climax" that is as explicit as its daydreaming end. A long middle section of slowly moving chords suspends us, and seems to create a ghostly reflection and enigmatic foil to the passionate protests of the "climax". Much of the piece uses single notes

dispersed within narrow registers; its sonorities rely heavily on the colors the piano can create through varied touch and pedaling. Throughout the work's score there are verbal directions, directed personally to the performer, that invoke extramusical references, e.g. "flat footed" and "center stage, shamelessly soliloquent"—all of which give the player a dramatic sense of being in personal dialogue with the composer. The contemplative close of the work seems to creep up unnoticed, and—as in Ben's other piano works the final sonorities linger well after the last silence.

**("...my chart shines high where the blue milk's upset...")
(for Milton Babbitt at 60) (1977)**

Although James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* is the source for the title of Ben's work, the structure of *chart* eschews Joyce's fondness for free improvisatory (i.e. "stream-of-consciousness") passages. Indeed in terms of structure, *Chart* is more indebted to the work of its dedicatee Milton Babbitt. The work is one in which the composer is able to coalesce seamlessly set-oriented structures to produce form, and melodic and harmonic sonorities to create fluidity and a dynamic architecture of timbre. There is a higher order to the structure of each section that does not displace the timeless quality of the bare thematic material often used. *Chart* is a slow meditative essay that is in constant evolution, textures are built onto each other in the ensuing sections, and the central high point of intensity effectively dissipates flow and suspends the movement in the following section labeled by Ben as the "Chopin section". Here, as two single lines weave throughout each other there is an immediate impression of a similarity in elements to those sections previous, but somehow in a more developed form -- throughout

the piece there is a sense of familiarity with the evolving material, as if it were always an version of the opening pairs of grouped dyads. But that kind of organic quality never seems aggressive or coercive in *chart*; its ebbs and flows never seem to derive from the sheer simplicity of the material, nor from the larger issues of set structure or formal design. Such naturalness possibly comes from Ben's strategy to let the material fully inhabit its space and fully examine its own contents before emerging as something new. Ben has always been engaged by the expressive qualities latent in the piano's peculiar incapacity to sustain its own sounds. and by its incapacity to produce sound-color except by the interactions of pitches; hence the exploration of sonorous qualities in *chart* is wholly immersed in the physical attributes of the piano. In this sense then, the piece is an essay on piano technique because it demands from its performer an understanding, really a new learning, of the ways in which piano sound decays, and how the combinations of decay and pitch location can create and cause magical collisions of timbre.

a note on the recording

O and ("...my chart shines high where the blue milk's upset...") were recorded live in rehearsal and concert, respectively, at Taplin Hall, Princeton University, on October 7, 2003 under less than optimum recording conditions; we agreed that their musical superiority justified their presence here despite the unavoidable sacrifice of sonic quality, which is not up to our normal recording standard. Invention and ("...what I could hear...") were recorded normally during 2002 and 2003 by Mary Lee Roberts.