

PLAYLIST AND NOTES FOR PROGRAM #4: 6 July 2011

PLAYLIST:

1. Paul DesMarais *Orpheus Mourns Eurydice*, for piano solo: Paul DesMarais, piano
2. Harley Gaber: *Kata for solo violin*
3. Elliott Carter: First String Quartet
4. Harold Shapero: Symphony for Classical Orchestra, Second Movement
5. Arthur Berger: *Polyphony for Orchestra*
6. Mel Powell: *Events*
7. Pozzi Escot: *Mirabilis II: I (for Marilyn Crispell)*
8. Donald Martino: Das Magische Kabinett von Dr. Schoenberg
9. Benjamin Boretz: *Postlude (Movement III of String Quartet)*

NOTES:

The thought of composers, musically as well as discursively expressed, derives - of necessity from their listening, and - in the case of the composer-thinkers we are discovering here - equally from their reading of philosophy, literature, history - as well as their own historical experiences of place and human surroundings. This broadcast is also, in part, a memorial to composers who have recently died, whose music and presences in my musical world have significantly inflected that world ontologically, aesthetically, and - of course - sonically.

1. Paul DesMarais died earlier this year; I wrote a commemorative note on Facebook:

Remembering Paul DesMarais

My beloved colleague (since I was at Brandeis and he was at Harvard in the early 1950s, and then at UCLA in the late 1950s) and dear friend for all that time, Paul DesMarais, a musician and composer of exquisite refinement, possessed of a transcendently lucid ear, an unswervingly steady musical compass, an expressive sensibility at once reserved and direct, someone whose seemingly permanent presence I had come to take for granted and which I greatly valued, has by his death left an irreparable rent in the fabric of my world.

Paul DesMarais's affinity for the mythical ethos of Classical Civilization, something which permeated his music from his earliest days immersed in a Nadia Boulanger-derived, French-flavored affinity for the then-so-called "neoclassic" affinity whose apex was the music of Stravinsky, evolved into something far less blatantly reflective of the surfaces of eighteenth century European music, something far more subtle in its formal freedom to evoke an imagined sensibility rather than the literal *klang* of any literal historical time. *Orpheus mourns Eurydice* for solo piano was written as part of a dance composition, and, as Paul plays it here, seems to convert

the evocation of a distant symbolic subject into a direct personal recomposing of the qualities and contents of his own sensibility - which at 75, in 1998, seem miraculously to be finding new beginnings.

[*Orpheus mourns Eurydice*] [sound clip from the website] [4:44]

2. We first learned about Harley Gaber as a composer, graphic artist, and film maker in the early 1970s, primarily through Kenneth Gaburo and his *Lingua Press* publications; Kenneth also talked about Harley with wide-eyed admiration - Harley had studied with him, and as frequently happens, the student blew the teacher's mind. Then Harley disappeared from the world, for reasons known only to himself and those intimate with him. Suddenly, a few years ago, he resurfaced and reintroduced himself to the musical world, at least the New York musical world. But shortly after that, a few weeks ago, we learned that he had died, that he had killed himself. There is music of his from around 2010, but this piece from 1969, as he absorbed qualities from Japanese and Korean music, is perhaps a quintessential image of his utterly special sensibility. Here are Harley's own notes for *Kata for solo violin*:

"Kata are the formal exercises or forms of karate, each consisting of a systematically organized series of techniques or moves (blocking, kicking, punching) performed in a set sequence. Although the kata are performed against an imaginary foe, they are nonetheless important in that they demand and help to develop the precision and discipline needed for actual karate fighting. From a less literal point of view the kata can be looked at as a highly developed art form, something very similar to dance. While the structure and specific tensions of each kata are determined by the various moves they employ, and are therefore somewhat different, they have in common the qualities of poise, focused energy, deliberation, and inevitability. Apart from strictly musical considerations, the performers should consider breathing, body movement, placement of feet, and movement of the bow arm as integral aspects of the performance. Finally, it is very important that the performance never gives the impression of being hurried. The slowness is a framework in which the musical gestures are defined: initially there is a feeling of extreme resistance, a forced containment of the gesture, which is ultimately released giving way to a feeling of floating and ascending."

[*Kata for solo violin*, Linda Cumiskey, violin; from a CRI LP] [13:35]

3. Elliott Carter First String Quartet

It's hard for me to convey the spectacular breakout into unimagined compositional possibilities that we experienced when we first heard Elliott Carter's First String Quartet in 1951; "we" being much of a generation of young American composers, discovering an intensity and a gravity in a quintessentially "American" music - clearly and cleanly erupting from the obscure innards and surfaces of the Ivesian morass - that was an epiphany of what lines and pulses and speeds and registers and layered multiplicities of simultaneous sustained trajectories of action and

implosion could infuse into our musical psyche, mind-altering, psychedelic to an inspiring extreme. What was overtly and stunningly radical in its reinvention of "how music goes" were the temporal modulations that alchemized each movement into the next by passages that embedded the qualities of the next events into those of the previous; and the simultaneity of musics of radically different, even starkly conflicting qualities of articulation and utterance. We're playing the piece from beginning to end: total time, about 40 minutes.

[Elliott Carter: First String Quartet; Walden Quartet on Columbia **if you have it - otherwise whatever you do have**] [39:00]

4. Harold Shapero Symphony for Classical Orchestra, II

Harold Shapero's Symphony is cold as ice and strong as steel; its overt association with a "Beethovenian" model is completely deceptive. Its physicalities are plosives to the solar plexus, or a shove or a nudge from the blind side; its subtleties are moves far more rapid and deft than you could ever match, or ever even really follow; a demonstration of absolute musical mastery whose subject is absolute musical mastery; whose beauties are the knowledge and control of where musical beauty resides and from whence it arises. It is *sui generis*, and will never be surpassed: unambiguously, it tells you so. Its affinities are blatant and fierce; but untouchable, irreducible, and, ultimately, intractable.

[Harold Shapero: Symphony for Classical Orchestra II; either Leonard Bernstein and the NY Philharmonic on CBS-Sony or Andre Previn and the Los Angeles Philharmonic on New World - whichever is more convenient] [15:00]

5. Arthur Berger, *Polyphony*

Here's what I wrote about Arthur's *Polyphony* in *The Nation* in December 1964:

Polyphony, played in October by the Boston Symphony, is one of those works that ultimately generate a far more powerful originality than their surfaces initially give away; this is the fundamentally Stravinskyan aspect of the piece, rather than the few details of texture and melody which can be associated more immediately with Stravinsky's music. And in any case, the surface is itself so full of striking details of sonority and rhythm, particularly the elastic registral and time spacing, and such a sensitivity to the qualities of every musical moment, that each attack appears vividly differentiated from each other, and seems to require its own special performance nuance. But underneath its tensile, brittle surface, *Polyphony* develops a unique synthesis of "diatonic" and "chromatic", in which the juxtaposition of familiar but traditionally disparate elements creates a whole complex of new linear and harmonic relationships. Similarly, the familiar ideas of recurrence and contrast are transformed into a dramatic duality between energy and quiescence; passages of great apparent activity, such as the opening, have an equality of rhythmic ac-

centuation which overtakes them from within with a progressive stasis that eventually engulfs the entire texture; the succeeding "calm" passages are undermined by an inner rhythmic turbulence which drives the texture into activity once again. The climax is in the final section, which repeatedly but unavailingly gropes for the opening; at the very end, the two ideas are violently juxtaposed as the violins virtually try to tear through the registral roof over an insistent, unvarying one-note tremolo—the ultimate expression in music of extreme energy without real movement—which persists to become the final sound.

And how I closed my "Vignettes of Old Masters II" in 2003, written in contemplation of Arthur's music upon his death that year:

You have to hang in with all of this if you want to get the feel of my sense of what an unquenchable lifelong vocation it represents – in a person who was commonly dismissed in slicker circles as an overintellectual dilettante (whatever happened to them?). It's hard, too, because it went on through the rest of 91 years. But because we were teacher-student, learner-learner, composer-composer, editor-coeditor, nonleader-nonfollower, irritant-counterirritant, for so many years, so much of our lives, it's probably way too close, most poignantly for me, to call.

[Arthur Berger: *Polyphony for Orchestra*][Louisville Orchestra on CRI if you don't have the New World Records album by Gil Rose] [12:36]

Mel Powell: *Events*

The penetration of progressive jazz into the compositional consciousness of twentieth-century American composers is a familiar historical cliché, but Mel Powell lived the history - his early life as a teen-prodigy pianoplayer and arranger for Benny Goodman (see *The Benny Goodman Story* for pictorial verification) was the grounding that underlay his "straight" musical education under Paul Hindemith at Yale, where he initiated the electronic music studio in the early 1960s. *Events* puts this all together in a major way - jazz, Hindemith, serialism, vocal-verbal theater, electronic generation and transformation: a mix that would almost be a stereotype were it not for Mel's extraordinary synoptic command of the precise geographies and affects of his multilayered drama.

[Mel Powell: *Events* (1966)] [6:50]

Pozzi Escot: *Mirabilis II: I* - Marilyn Crispell, piano

A group of avant-garde "straight" composers made compositions for the adventurous new-jazz pianist and composer Marilyn Crispell. Pozzi Escot is one of the most erudite and theoretically sophisticated of my colleagues; she's usually mentioned as a learned practitioner of musical mathematics; we interacted effervescently when she visited the Music Program in the Bard College Graduate

School in 1983; she was the only woman composer who participated in Marilyn Crispell's project; and Pozzi's oblique relation to jazz, refracted through her originary Peruvian ear, creates a fascinating counterpoint of irreconcilable affects in search of an integral expressive language.

[Pozzi Escot: *Mirabilis II:I*] [Album: *Stellar Pulsations*; Leo Records] [9:04]

Donald Martino: *Das Magische Kabinett von Dr Schoenberg*

What should give "serialism" a better name than it has among music lovers looking for serious experience but brainwashed by journalistic stereotypes (like whatever "cerebral" is supposed to actually *sound* like, or the idea that dumping a whole culture of music-making into a single slogan-labeled mass makes it all sound the same - as, under such instruction, it may well do) - what should work against all of that is the amazingly different musics - amazingly different in every and any affective, sonic, energetic qualities of their modes of musical utterance - think: Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, Ben Weber, Mel Powell, Pozzi Escot, of the music you've heard up to here - and also the sheer elegance and expressivity of almost any of Don Martino's music (he studied with Milton Babbitt but his sensibility is closer to Alban Berg's). This is the fifth movement of *from the other side*, entitled "Das Magische Kabinett von Dr. Schoenberg"; you could think of it as a whimsical discourse about serial music.

[Donald Martino: "Das Magische Kabinett von Dr. Schoenberg"] [Brad Lubman and The New Millennium; Albany Records] [8:16]

Benjamin Boretz: *Postlude, from String Quartet*

In 1957 I composed a two-movement string quartet under the powerful volcanic force of Elliott Carter's First Quartet; in 2005 - almost 50 years later - I was thinking about a piece Jim Randall had just composed as a response to my orchestral piece *UN(-)*, called *A Benfest: The Trajectory of UN(-)*; some qualities of sound, sensibility, and time which Jim was counter-composing to those of *UN(-)* were so suggestive to me of an entirely new trajectory of those qualities within my music that I composed a third movement for my old quartet; a postlude, to reimage the pitch-time-utterance constructs of the *Overture* and *Intermezzo* of 1957-58. The performance here is by the DAFO Quartet of Krakow, as it was recorded and mastered by the incomparable Polish *Tonmeister* Malgorzata Polanska.

[Benjamin Boretz: Postlude (movement III of String Quartet); DAFO Quartet, Open Space CD 23][23:35]