

Chamber Music Society - February 11, 2018

Music from Copland House

Derek Bermel, *clarinet*

Curtis Macomber, *violin*

Alexis Pia Gerlach, *cello*

Michael Boriskin, *piano*

Living Frescoes (2012)

Kevin Puts (b. 1972)

Prelude (Going Forth I)

I. Fire Birth

Interlude (Going Forth II)

II. The Path

Interlude (Going Forth III)

III. The Deluge

IV. The Voyage

Interlude (Going Forth IV)

V. First Light

Born in St. Louis, Kevin Puts studied piano and composition at Yale and Eastman School of Music. Currently he is Director of the Composer's Institute of the Minnesota Orchestra and teaches at the Peabody Institute of Music. His music has been commissioned and performed by leading ensembles and soloists. His first opera, *Silent Night* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2012 and his fifth symphony, a multi-media work, *The City*, was co-commissioned by Baltimore (to celebrate its 100th anniversary) and Carnegie Hall (as part of its 175th year celebration). While his earlier work was for instrumental ensembles, his recent compositions are with texts: his second opera, *The Manchurian Candidate*; a work for voice and orchestra for soprano Renee Fleming (based on letters of Georgia O'Keeffe); and his first chamber opera, *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree*, based on the novel by Peter Ackroyd. Perhaps *Living Frescoes*, which was stimulated by Bill Viola's visual art and text is somewhat in the same vein.

The composer has provided the following notes for his work:

Living Frescoes was inspired by Bill Viola's 2002 art installation *Going Forth by Day*, a series of five looped digital "frescoes" which explore themes of human existence: individuality, society, death, rebirth. The title of the work derives from a literal translation of the title of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a guide for the soul once it is freed from the darkness of the body to finally "go forth by the light of day." Viola describes the five panels:

Fire Birth – A human form emerges from a dim submerged world. A body swims in the fluid of an unconscious state between death and rebirth. Orange rays of light penetrate the surface of the water, coming from the previous world, which ended in fire. Now, illuminated by the light of prior destruction, the human essence searches for a way through this underwater realm. It seeks the material form and substance necessary for its rebirth.

The Path – It is the time of the summer solstice high in the mountains. The early morning light reveals a steady stream of people moving along a path through the forest ... There is no beginning or end to the procession of individuals- they have been walking long before we see them here, and they will be walking long after they leave our view ... They move in an intermediate space between two worlds.

The Deluge – A stone building, newly restored, stands in the clear light of the autumnal equinox. People move along the street immersed in the flow of day-to-day events ... Families are leaving their homes, people on the street carrying personal possessions, all actions become colored by an increasing tension in the community. A final moment of panic ensues as individuals rush to save themselves. The last ones, in denial of the inevitable, have waited too long in the security of their own homes. Now they must run for their lives as the deluge strikes with full force at the very heart of their private world ...

The Voyage – It is late afternoon at the time of winter solstice. A small house stands on a hill overlooking the inland sea. Inside, an old man lies ill on a bed, attended by his son and daughter-in-law. Outside, another man sits by the door keeping vigil. Down by the shore, a boat is slowly being loaded with the personal possessions of the dying man's home. An old woman waits patiently nearby. After some time, the son and daughter-in-law must depart, leaving the old man along with his dreams and fading breath. His house, container of lives and memories, is closed and locked. Soon after, the old man reappears on the shore and is greeted by his wife, who has been waiting for his arrival. The two board the boat, which departs, carrying them and their belongings to the distant isles of the Blessed ...

First Light – It is dawn on the morning of the vernal equinox. A team of rescue workers has been laboring all night to save people in a massive flash flood in the desert. Exhausted and physically drained, they slowly pack up their equipment as the dawn light gradually builds and the emotional impact of the night's events deepens. A woman ... silently waits, filled with fear and fading hope for the fate of a loved one, her son, who will never return. Eventually, the exhaustion and distress take their toll and, one by one, the four remaining individuals drop off to sleep. All is still and calm. Then, a disturbance appears on the face of the water and a young man's face emerges. He rises up, limp and dripping wet, and floats up into the sky. The drips falling off his body turn to rain, waking the sleeping people. Unaware of what has happened, they move to gather their things in the downpour ... The rain subsides and the light of a new day shines brightly onto the rocks and hills.

Quartet for the End of Time (1941)

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

- I. Liturgy of crystal
- II. Vocalise, for the angel who announces the end of time
- III. Abyss of the birds
- IV. Interlude
- V. Praise for the eternity of Jesus
- VI. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets
- VII. Cluster of rainbows, for the angel who announces the end of time
- VIII. Praise to the immortality of Jesus

As a composer and teacher, Olivier Messiaen was probably the most influential musician of the second half of the 20th century. He was also a fine organist and his writings about musical thought and expression are profound and inspirational. One special example of his thinking comes from a speech made in 1958 at the World's Fair in Brussels which he begins by commenting that of the three stages in artistic work – inspiration, work and final product – “in this terrible 20th century” principal emphasis is placed on work, or, technique. Composers don't trust inspiration; they call it “romantic and unmodern.” “And yet, how many works can be found that answer to the full meaning of the inspiration. One has to bow deeply in front of the true masterpieces. They are the result of immeasurable amounts of work and technique, both in the service of inspiration.”

Continuing, he notes that composers endlessly stress the phenomenon of sound, even to the point of paraphrasing Mallarmé's comment to Degas, “Poetry is made with words,” by saying “Music is created by sound.” “But I reject this! Music is not made only of sound. It is created also by levels of strength and cohesiveness (that is the dynamic area); with timbre and attack (that is the phonetic area); with accents, heavy and light pressure; with different tempi (that is the kinesthetic area); and finally and most of all with time, with the divisions of time, with number and varied time (that is the quantitative area). Let us not forget that the first and most essential element in music is rhythm, and the rhythm first and foremost is changes in time and length. Let us imagine a single beat in the whole universe. One beat – with an eternity before it and after it. In that moment, one before and one after, time is born. Let's imagine a moment just after that: the moment of another beat. Since each beat is extended by the successive silence, the second stroke will be longer than the first one. And more beats, other durations . . . in this way rhythm is born.”

Quartet from the End of Time was composed in a POW camp in Belgium where the composer was imprisoned by the Germans and where the choice of instruments was dictated by what was available. In spite of the circumstances sustained by his devout Catholicism, Messiaen imbued this early masterpiece with his creative passion for bird song, fascination with rhythm and meter, and his indefatigable belief in inspiration. In a preface to the work he wrote:

I saw an angel full of strength descend from heaven, clad in a cloud with a rainbow on his head. His visage was like the sun, his feet like columns of fire. He put his right foot on the ocean and his left foot on the earth and when he stood up over the ocean and the earth, he lifted his hands toward heaven and swore to Him who lives for hundreds of

thousands of years and said: “There shall be no more time; but the day when the seven angels’ trumpets sound, the mystery of God will be fulfilled.”

Commentary by the composer with a few additional points about specific elements in the music follow:

I. *Liturgie du cristal / Crystal Liturgy*

Between 3- and 4- o’clock in the morning, the birds awaken: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, amid notes of shining sound and a halo of trills lost high up in the trees. This is the harmonious silence of heaven.

Rhythmic pedal points in the piano and cello, bird song in the violin and clarinet

II. *Vocalise, pour l’Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps / Vocalise, for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time*

The very brief first and third sections evoke the power of this mighty angel, crowned with a rainbow and clothed in a cloud, who places one foot on the sea and the other on the land. The middle section evokes the ineffable harmonies of heaven, with gentle cascades of bell-like, blue-orange chords in the piano, encircling the chant-like song of the violin and cello.

In 3/4 time; AB (without the clarinet)A. In the B section, *rather slow*, the strings play one melody while the piano’s chords are like “drops of water in the rainbow.”

III. *Abîme des oiseaux / Abyss of the Birds*

The Abyss is Time, with its sadnesses and tedium. The birds are the opposite of Time; they represent our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song!

No time signature, not earthbound: solo clarinet. A description of the abyss, sadness and weariness contrasts with the birds who are the “opposite” time, like light, stars, the heavens. Measures vary, bird song alternates with plain melody.

IV. *Interlude*

This scherzo is in a more outgoing character than the other movements – a brief respite, yet related to the rest of the work by various melodic references.

In 2/4, aa, unison melody in violin, clarinet, cello; b, bird song in clarinet answered by violin and cello; a.

V. *Louange à l’Éternité de Jésus / Praise to the Eternity of Jesus*

Here, Jesus is considered as one with the Word of God. A long, infinitely slow cello melody glorifies, with love and reverence, the eternity of this mighty yet gentle Word, “of which the years can never exhaust.” The melody unfolds majestically, as if from a distance both intimate and awesome. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Cello, piano. Slow, no time signature; in E Major. Homage to Jesus as the eternal word. Long melody line + ostinato, repeated chords.

VI. *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes / Dance of Fury for the Seven Trumpets*

The four instruments in unison create the effect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse, followed by various calamities, the trumpet of the seventh angel announcing the consummation of the mystery of God). The sounds are granitic and steel-like – enormous blocks of livid fury, of ice-like frenzy, culminating at the end in the terrifying power of the theme.

Octave unison throughout; rhythmic study. Unexpected *pp* in the mid-section..

VII. *Fouillis d'arc-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin de Temps / Clusters of Rainbows for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time*

Certain passages here recall the second movement. The mighty Angel appears, crowned by a rainbow (symbol of peace, of wisdom, and of every luminous sound). In my dreams, I hear and see certain chords and melodies, familiar colors and forms; then, after this transitory stage, I pass into unreality and lose myself in the rapture of a whirling, gyrating fusion of superhuman sound and color. These swords of fire, these pools of blue-orange lava, these shooting stars: this is the cluster, these are the rainbows!

In 3/4. Large, complex movement, 7 sections, variations of two themes.

VIII. *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus / Praise to the Immortality of Jesus*

A counterpart to the fifth movement. Why this second glorification? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus: Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh, immortality resurrected, so as to communicate His life to us. This movement is pure love. The slow rise toward the highest pitches is the ascension of man toward his Lord, of the son of God toward his Father, of the mortal newly made divine toward paradise.

Violin, piano. In 4/4; an homage in E Major. Long melody with chordal accompaniment.

End of Time: end of earthbound things comes with the introduction of the birds. End of subdivisions of Time which is now additive and eternal. Time does not dictate the shape of the movements.

- Program notes by Dr. Jean Christensen

All are cordially invited to attend the pre-concert presentation by the ever-engaging Matt Ertz, Assistant Director of the Music Library, in room 130, beginning at 2 PM.