

Notes on the Program

Saturday, August 17, 2019

Clancy Newman (b. 1977)

***Collision Course* for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano (2014)**

I had the idea for *Collision Course* somewhere high over the Pacific, flying from Sydney to LA. I wouldn't have thought that being cooped up in economy class for 14 hours would be conducive to inspiration, but it was. The idea involved traveling across the ocean, albeit not by plane but by boat. The following poem, which details this scene, will be read aloud before each performance:

*Three ships sail from three distant ports
Unaware that they are on a collision course.
Each night on each ship
While the passengers sleep,
A lone musician plays to the fish and the stars.
Late one night, while the sea is calm and the moon full,
The ships approach within earshot.
Strains of melody cross the waves
And three threads merge to one.
As the ships pass within a yard, they slow almost to a halt.
But the music doesn't slow at all;
No, it becomes a frenzied romp!
And all the passengers, from all three ships,
Awaken from their slumbers.
Drawn by the music, they climb on deck,
Stomp their feet and dance.
But the moment shared by strangers doesn't last for long.
The ships continue on their courses, their sails catch the wind;
The tune's thread unravels,
The dancers return to bed.
And the ships sail on away through the night,
The musicians alone once again.*

—Clancy Newman

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

***Contrasts* for Clarinet, Violin, and Piano, Sz.111 (1938)**

In the summer of 1938, lunching on the Riviera with Benny Goodman at the Pagani Restaurant, the violinist Josef Szigeti had what he called a “brainwave”: he suggested that Goodman commission a piece from his friend Béla Bartók for the three of them to play. Benny agreed. It was to be a piece in the Hungarian style, and short enough to fit on one side of a 78, as Szigeti wrote to Bartok:

So please write to Benny Goodman... a registered letter in which you agree to write within a given time a 6-7 minute clarinet-violin duo with piano accompaniment.... If possible, it would be very good if the piece were to consist of two independent sections, ... and of course we hope it will include a brilliant clarinet and violin cadenza! In any case I can safely say that Benny brings out from the instrument whatever the clarinet is physically able to perform at all, and quite wonderfully – in regions MUCH higher than the high note in [Strauss'] Eulenspiegel!

Bartók delivered the piece quickly, finishing it on September 24, 1938. Not only was it too long, however, (weighing in at eleven minutes), but he had written, in private if not in secret, a slow middle movement. Bartók wrote back to Szigeti: “Salesmen usually deliver less than what is expected from them. But there are exceptions, though I know people are not likely to be pleased with the contractor’s largesse if he delivers a suit for an adult instead of the dress ordered for a two-year-old baby.”

As Szigeti requested, the piece does contain brilliant cadenzas: one each for violin and clarinet. Additionally, the piece does call for some unusual techniques from the fiddle. The extra violin on stage is specially tuned for the raucous opening of the third movement. Sometimes out-of-tune just sounds best.

—Tim Summers

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major, M. 77 (1927)

There is a kind of perfection in the works of Maurice Ravel, a thorough and fastidious compositional virtuosity. Igor Stravinsky to call him the ‘most perfect of Swiss clockmakers’ — he was onto something. With Ravel’s perfection comes an unusually strong sense of artificiality, a sense of music that is measured and constructed by a distant or masked composer. Perfection and artificiality are two sides of the same coin, and neither contains a judgment for or against the music. Nor are they external critical remarks: Ravel himself expressed the desire to make technically perfect pieces which worked almost as autonomous musical objects.

A description of the Violin Sonata (like many of the often sparsely-written later works) certainly benefits from this 'objective' perspective. The sonata is built of three very different movements, whose elements are not so much related to one another as they are simply positioned in such a way as to reflect one another, and so seem to take on life. The first movement has long lines, with occasional mechanistic punctuation, and concludes with a harmonic resolution that is one of the more beautiful sequences in music. The second movement is a (very) French take on turn-of-the-century American jazz style, featuring a sort of cubist banjo simulation, quick positionings of keys, and a fractured, last-call coda. The final movement, *Perpetuum Mobile*, is explicitly 'automatic,' as it methodically knits together elements from the previous two movements, gathering steam, to create a varied, colorful, and even slightly ecstatic fabric. It's like a musical mobile made from early-Modern parts.

Viewed from 2019, a violin sonata might seem an odd choice for the exploration of mechanical aesthetics. There is something impractical about it, like crossing the Atlantic in a dirigible, or using a steam-powered computer. But, on the other hand, like the Villa Savoie or the 1939 World's Fair, it now stands beautifully with other indicators of the future-that-might-have-been. Partly as a matter of style and partly as a matter of craft (though perhaps not as a matter of fact), there's something futuristically beautiful about it still. Which is a good reason to hear it now.

—Tim Summers

Georges Enescu (1881-1955)
Octet in C Major, Op. 7 (1900)

Although Georges Enescu is not so widely known as a composer, he was a hugely influential musician. Born in Romania, he studied at the conservatory of the *Gesellschaft für Musikfreunde* in Vienna, and then studied in Paris with Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré. Though he was principally interested in composition, Enescu was most famous as a violinist. He performed with Pablo Casals, Jacques Thibaud, Alfred Cortot, Dinu Lipatti (his godson), and Louis Fournier, among many others. His performance in San Francisco inspired the young Yehudi Menuhin to go to Paris to study violin with him. He also played piano extraordinarily well (with Menuhin, e.g.), and was a fine enough conductor to be offered Toscanini's former post at the New York Philharmonic. He was a performing musician of the very highest order.

His compositional style was not particularly well suited to the boisterous avant-garde ferment of the early twentieth century. His mastery of formal problems (thematic development especially) was very secure, and he had something of the same will to consolidate and condense 19th-century compositional techniques as Arnold

Schoenberg. (The *Octet for Strings in C Major, Op. 7*, coincidentally, works as a one-movement sonata form laid over four movements, much as Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony* works as a four-movement form laid over a single sonata movement.) He was much more circumspect in his compositional adventures, however, and so never made as much noise as the *enfants terribles* of Modernism. He had no school, no urge to break things, and no real disciples.

In the *Octet*, which he began to compose when he was a mere 19 years old, one can hear thematic development of a conventionally romantic type combined with the arched phrases of his teacher Fauré — that much is to be expected. But there is also a kind of fervency about the piece (almost like a performance technique — a kind of vibrato — encoded in its lines), which may above all serve best as the signature of Enescu the composer. There is an honesty about Enescu's dynamism that affected a great many of the musicians with whom he had contact in his career: a force which lives still in all of his music, and nowhere more than in the *Octet*.

—Tim Summers