

# An MMmusing Reader



A selection of 55 blog entries from Michael Monroe's multi-media musings on music, the mind, meaning, and more...

Blog Debut: February 24, 2007

Entries to Date: 446

August 30, 2012

[MMmusing.blogspot.com](http://MMmusing.blogspot.com)



*TABLE OF CONTENTS*

TIP OF THE HATTO .....	4
THE HATTO SONNETS.....	5
GREAT MOMENTS IN STUPID HEADLINES .....	7
A LITTLE MORE ABOUT THAT .....	9
HYPERSPACE .....	11
BELL FAILURE .....	13
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE? .....	14
A TASTE OF 1825.....	16
TRANSLATION/TRANSCRIPTION/TRANSIMPSON .....	20
TRANSCRIPTION AS A METAPHOR FOR LISTENING .....	23
TRADITION! .....	26
SAVING THE BEST FOR FIRST .....	28
CLASSICAL VANITY .....	32
THE METAMORPHOSIS OF DON JUAN?.....	34
THE 12 COMPOSERS OF CHRISTMAS (2.1).....	36
THE BEST CHRISTMAS PARTY MUSIC EVER.....	37
AN OLD VIOLA JOKE.....	39
THE KIND OF INFECTIOUS IT'S GOOD TO SPREAD AROUND .....	40
WARHORSE WORDSMITHING .....	42
STRANGE LOOP.....	46
CANON LOOP.....	47
RETRO LOOP .....	49
AMBIGRAMANIA .....	50
CARROUSEL PERPÉTUEL.....	51
WEBERN IN MAYBERRY .....	52
LE SACRE DU PETERMAN .....	53
FOR THAT SPECIAL MASOCHIST IN YOUR LIFE.....	54
THE RITE OF APPALACHIAN SPRING .....	55
MAGICAL MUSIC.....	56
CHOPIN'S FUNERAL MARCH (WITH GHOSTS!).....	59

NAME THAT BASSOON.....	60
ILLUMINATING ORNAMENTATION.....	62
TESTING WITH THE STARS.....	64
REFLECTIONS ON A 2-PART INVENTION .....	74
...IN WHICH WINNIE THE POOH INSPIRES TWITTER-LIKE PROGRAM NOTES .....	76
WHY TWITTER EXISTS... ..	80
SHOULD THERE BE A "FREE THE MOVEMENTS" MOVEMENT? .....	82
BACH DOUBLED .....	85
SLEIGH RIDE IN A FAST MACHINE.....	88
GOOD FRIDAY BACH .....	89
UND SINGEN HALLELUJA!.....	91
META-UNPREDICTABILITY.....	94
MULTIMEDIA MOONLIGHT MARCH MADNESS MASHUP .....	96
SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BEETHOVEN AND STRAUSS.....	98
MOZART MASHUP MEDLEY .....	100
ATONALITY ON ICE.....	102
MOZART MASHUP DECODED .....	106
MY JESUS, JOY OF MAN'S DESIRING.....	107
FUN WITH THE FIRST FIGARO FINALE.....	109
BALLADE BLOGGING .....	113
BALLADE BLOGGING, PART 2: SUBLIMATION AND THE SUBLIME.....	115
BALLADE BLOGGING, PART 5: RIGHT AND WRONG.....	118
BALLADE BLOGGING, PART 7: SELF-REFLECTION .....	123
NOW JUST A MINUTE... ..	125
DANCES WITH WORDS.....	127

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2007

## *Tip of the Hatto*

I decided to start my blogging career by musing about the irresistible Joyce Hatto story that popped up within the past week. The basic plot goes like this: Joyce Hatto, a fairly obscure British concert pianist whose career had been cut short by cancer in the 1970's, began recording much of the enormous classical piano repertoire in the 1990's and had left behind well more than 100 CDs when she died in the summer of 2006. Although the recordings were all privately issued by Hatto's producer husband, they had already become somewhat legendary because of the astounding quality of her playing of an almost impossibly broad range of demanding music. It now turns out to be likely that most, if not all, of these recorded performances were simply lifted from the CDs of a wide variety of pianists, some famous and some fairly obscure. You can catch up on the details all over the web; the remarkable Wikipedia is a good place to start. (Say what you want about Wikipedia, but it turns out to be a very useful clearinghouse for an emerging story such as this one. Every time I go back to the Hatto page on Wikipedia, there seems to be new information. There's certainly never been an encyclopedia that could function at all like this.)

Anyway, I think the story is a useful starting point for looking at how the classical music world functions and for thinking about how it is that we interact with music. First of all, it's a reminder that our reaction to a given musical performance isn't just about the music; it's not just about the notes on the page and it's not just about the sounds that result. There can be little question that one of the things that drew reviewers to Hatto's recordings in the first place is the sheer awe-inspiring size of her discography. That, coupled with her compelling biography (fighting cancer and age) would only naturally color one's listening. After all, so much of the virtuoso piano repertoire is of interest partially because we marvel at those who can play all those notes well. Part of the *meaning* of such music comes from our assumption that the performer has followed the rules and met the challenge fairly. When the subject in question is a pretty much unknown woman who is recording at a virtually unprecedented pace while fighting cancer and entering an age at which technique often begins to falter, well, that's bound to change how one hears. If it were just about the notes, no one would care if a pianist performing a Chopin etude had a pianist friend nearby who'd occasionally jump in and help out with an awkward leap. I've often joked with page-turners about having them help out with a few hard-to-reach bass notes when I'm playing difficult chamber music repertoire. If all that mattered was the musical sounds, it would be completely logical to have a page-turner help out in this way at times.

Likewise, we wouldn't care if we learned that some intricate counterpoint in a Bach fugue had been overdubbed in a studio. Although the degree to which edited recordings have affected our hearing and expectations is an important discussion for another time, the fact is that we listen to most of the classical repertoire with an important accounting for the human factor. So, almost all those who sat down to listen to Hatto recordings for the first time almost certainly brought with them the knowledge that she had an apparent command of virtually the entire rep. Think how different it would be to receive a recording of, say, the *Goldberg Variations* and learn that the pianist had devoted 20+ cancer-stricken years to that work alone. The biography would still be important as the listener would be more inclined to believe that the performance had a certain intimate knowledge of that work, but the assumptions about the pianist's technical equipment would be quite different.

Of course, whether or not the early Hatto enthusiasts were biased by her bio when listening, there can be little question that the unique bio and discography helped bring attention to her in the first place. One of the great ironies here is that she is now much more famous because of the uncovering of fraud, and by strange extension, there are many little-known pianists who might now more receive more attention than they otherwise would have ever gotten. Think of it: there are now these pianists whose recordings came out years ago who have lucked into fresh and incredibly enthusiastic reviews of their work. Of all the conspiracy theories that have been floated, here's a particularly crazy one I've come up with. What if a group of pianists decided they could get more attention for their work by having reviewers listen to all their different recordings as if they were by the same person? Because of the superstar name-recognition fixation that afflicts the classical music world as much as the world at large, this would have the effect of letting many performers benefit from the superstardom of one. It's kind of the equivalent of having all of their performances hooked up with a big movie, except here the focus is entirely on their performances and they get attention from many serious pianophiles. Then, once the hoax is uncovered, all the performers still benefit by association with this mythical figure. Their playing made the myth work. Now, I don't believe this theory for a second and it would be extremely difficult to pull off without getting caught, but notice that the effect is not that different than if someone had planned things this way. Maybe Joyce Hatto and her husband even envisioned this as a way to bring credit to performances that they thought to be the best of the best. Doubtful, but that's about as optimistic a spin as one could put on this whole thing.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 2007

### *The Hatto Sonnets*

My blogger profile mentions that reading Douglas Hofstadter's *Le Ton beau de Marot* changed my life. How? Aside from provoking my ongoing fascination with the art of translation, it also resulted in a completely unexpected desire to write **poetry**. One of my favorite chapters explores a variety of attempts to translate *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin's great novel-in-verse, into poetic English. I have since enjoyed reading **this translation** several times and, like **many** before me, have found the "Onegin"-style sonnet to be irresistible. There's now a little piece of software running in my brain that starts up every now and then (I think that's called a virus) and tries to convert interesting stories into Pushkin's delightful pattern. Given all that, the following was pretty much inevitable:



## The Hatto Sonnets

by Michael Monroe

There's nothing like a stirring story  
 to make our list'ning ears believe  
 an artist scaled the heights of glory;  
 and so what better way to weave  
 an eager critical reception  
 than with a web of bold deception?  
 You see, this tale, upon review,  
 is wonderful, it's just not true.  
 But let's go back now and revisit  
 Joyce Hatto's curious career,  
 the one that once did not appear  
 to be suspicious or elicit  
 much int'rest from the British press.  
 That's how it started, more or less.

Her bio seemed a good predictor  
 of greatness since her teachers were  
 the likes of Krisch, Cortot, and Richter,  
 to name some to whom she'd refer.  
 She says she played some big recitals  
 that featured such imposing titles  
 as all the transcendental Liszt  
 (assuming that she did exist).  
 We're pretty sure she once recorded  
 a big concerted work by Bax.  
 There aren't a lot of other facts  
 from independently reported  
 news sources on which we can draw.  
 Her bio has that little flaw.

An illness meant she had to exit  
 the stage; she never would return.  
 Who knows if ever she regrets it,  
 but there was music still to learn.  
 There must have been a great profusion  
 of practicing while in seclusion  
 with Mr. Barrington dash Coupe,  
 her husband, for she would regroup  
 and start recording decades later.  
 Whenever ready, she could go  
 record in his own studio.  
 And what emerged was something greater  
 than anyone could comprehend.  
 She played the rep from end to end.

Complete surveys of each composer  
 soon found their way onto CD.  
 In every case, the playing shows her  
 to be a master; all agree.  
 Reviewers also all extol her  
 concerto discs with Maestro Köhler.  
 It's hard to say just who he is;  
 he's unknown in the music biz.  
 But skepticism's overshadowed  
 by awe at what this woman's done.  
 She's outdone almost everyone.  
 So through discography Joyce Hatto'd  
 attained the fame she'd been denied  
 and left a legend when she died.

In death her name continued growing,  
 for art recorded still communes  
 with all who hear, and there's no knowing  
 just where we'd be without iTunes.  
 Computers don't succumb to stories  
 but they can access inventories  
 of discs from all around the globe.  
 A perfect match set off a probe  
 which showed her work was László Simon's,  
 and once that cover had been blown,  
 it seemed that nothing was her own.  
 I guess the lesson is that diamonds  
 that we discover in the rough  
 are more than likely other stuff.

But do not let this grim conclusion  
 to Hatto's notoriety  
 result in general disillusion.  
 Remember it's a mystery  
 just what she knew about the scandal.  
 Perhaps it's true she couldn't handle  
 the truth her husband tried to hide.  
 (No doubt, he took us for a ride.)  
 And yet for those whose art was gifted  
 we need not shed a single tear  
 since all this means that more will hear  
 the evidence that they are gifted.  
 [That doesn't mean that you are free  
 to steal my poem. Don't Hatto me.]

I only started it yesterday afternoon, so I'm sure there will be revisions. I guess I wanted to be sure to get this out there before **Jeremy Denk** produces something **similar**. And yes, I know I'm probably butchering the correct pronunciation of László Simon's name with my tortured rhyme. Maybe I should go download his **Liszt** as an act of repentance.

SUNDAY, MARCH 18, 2007

## *Great Moments in Stupid Headlines*

The New York Times' Anthony Tommasini's late-to-the-game **take** on the **Joyce Hatto** situation begins with a truly stupid headline, "Can What You Know Affect What You Hear?" Well, of course it can; it can't not affect it. What you hear is completely and inseparably connected with what you know. He's writing about the apparent tendency of listeners to hear Hatto's playing differently because of what they believed to be true about her bio. Well, yes, that's an obvious point (that I **made** weeks ago, as I know others did), but I hope Mr. Tommasini didn't actually write that headline - that he doesn't think there's any actual question about our hearing music differently according to context.

More and more I think that so much of the confusion and misdirection that occurs when talking about classical music has to do with a failure to grasp just how complicated the process of "listening" is. As I **mentioned** a few posts ago, the whole idea of objectively reviewing a musical work or performance is absurd. This goes for all listening. We tend to forget that what our ears hear is filtered through innumerable mental pathways that have to do with our knowledge of the music, our past experiences hearing it, extra-musical associations, and a thousand other things, etc.

But when music enters more rigid worlds such as academia and journalism, there is a desire to talk about it in much more objective terms - namely, to pretend that we can listen to certain sounds (which acquire almost all their meaning through reference) and hear them just as sounds. **This** recent article by Edward Rothstein (also in the NY Times) touched on the issue from a different perspective. It concerns the efforts made to recreate a live performance of Glenn Gould's famous 1955 recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. A brilliant man has gone to an extraordinary amount of effort to design software that interprets the recorded audio to determine exactly (more or less) how the piano keys and pedals were manipulated by Gould; this information is then sent back through a computer that can "play" the performance on a modern concert grand. It's a miracle of reverse-engineering if it really comes close to its goal.

In reporting on his own response to this new recreation, Rothstein is correct to point out several problems with the idea; most importantly, that unless the new piano is exactly like the one Gould played, it will fail significantly to be a true Gould performance, because every pianist constantly is adjusting to the feedback from a given instrument and its acoustic environment. The "instructions" would have to change for every different piano. Rothstein also wisely asks if his somewhat cold response to the new live performance is partially due to his fondness for the old, less life-like mono sound that he has long associated with the famous recording. That's getting closer to the problem because it acknowledges that our own associations (in this case, with the results of an inferior recording technology) play into how we think about what we hear.

What Rothstein doesn't address is the most important point of all. Hearing a piano "played" live by a computer is different from hearing it played "live" or recorded by a person because we listen differently, *because of "what we know."* Knowing that a human being is actually getting all of those spectacular sounds with only ten fingers working in real time colors what we think about the performance. And it should. The skill required to play a piece is often one of the very things the music is *about*. There's no question that the recording industry has had a big effect on the degree to which that's true for us; the opportunity to listen to the same performance over and over is a revolutionary

thing and it has led us to believe more and more that we just listen to the notes and the sounds, without regard for who's producing them. That's because all we have to do is hit a button and the music is produced for us - it's hard to imagine thinking that way in a world where the music could only be heard played live. In such a world, we are sure to be more naturally aware of our indebtedness to the performing artist.

But for pretty much all of the classical repertoire, that indebtedness is still there. Gould's 1955 recording wasn't just important because it made us hear the music in a new way; it also amazed and still amazes those who hear it because of the prodigious skills that it demonstrates. (We'll ignore, for now, the whole "editing" question because most who hear it tend to think of it as a complete performance.) I found it almost sad that in this recent [interview](#) pianist Alfred Brendel says "no performer should be called a genius." His idea is that everything the performer does is in subservience to the composer in whom the real genius resides. That's ridiculous. As I've said, many works are created with the very idea of showing off a performer's skills, and the skills required to play the most difficult repertoire well are often just as remarkable as the music itself.

I do like the notion that the less-than-ideal audio quality of Gould's '55 *Goldbergs* is an inseparable part of its identity. I've never been much of an audiophile myself - I only care about audio quality to the degree that it interferes with my appreciation of the music. (Here's an interesting recent [musing](#) on that issue.) Of course, I suppose the more one trains oneself to be concerned about audio quality, the more one is likely to be distracted by its absence. However, I think this again speaks to the fact that music lives in our response to it - not in the sound waves that send it to our ears. This is why a Beethoven was able to compose when he was deaf. Of course it must have been awful for him not to hear what he wrote, but the meaning of the music he could still perceive using the same mental pathways that we use. He couldn't connect them to aural events - but he could, in many ways, still have an aural experience.

In summary, I don't have more than a passing interest in hearing a computer replicate Gould's playing on a state-of-the-art piano, even though it might allow me to hear the music in a wonderful acoustic environment. On the other hand, if by some miracle it turned out that there was a new, low-quality live recording of Gould playing the *Goldberg Variations* at a level similar to the famous recording, I'd be much more interested in hearing that. The sounds would be superior in the first case, but "what I know" would make the second case so much more interesting and meaningful.

SUNDAY, MARCH 18, 2007

### *[a little more about that](#)*

A couple of extra thoughts I had about that last [post](#) while digging my poor car out from a block of frozen show:

1) The Gould reverse-engineered recreation is a great example of a solution to a problem that isn't a problem. At least for me, I've never felt regret about the audio quality of Gould's 1955 performance. And, as I've detailed at some length, I'm not that interested in hearing a computer-controlled piano recreate it live because Gould (no matter what philosophical objections he would surely have to my argument) wouldn't be there. The human engineering is what I'd actually want to be in the presence of. When I think of unneeded solutions, I always remember the pianist Nelita True saying once in a master class that some inventor had shown up at Interlochen with a metronome that could tick off the sort of 19 against 3 or 11 against 2 patterns one finds in Chopin. The absurdity is that those groups of 19 or 11 or 14 or whatever aren't intended to be measured in such a mathematical way. Thanks, but no thanks.

2) With respect to the opinions critics had of the Hatto recordings, [Tommasini](#) does in fact say that "context should theoretically not matter, especially in instrumental music." He goes on to admit to some of the exceptions that he's experienced, but it's the *should* that attracts my attention. Where did it come from? There's an implied moral component there; that a truly good, serious, objective listener can't let himself be affected by little things like biographical detail. I'd argue that it's impossible not to be affected, but how many reviewers delude themselves into thinking they remain objective? How much harm does this do to good, honest thinking about music? Why shouldn't critics listen differently when they think a recording of a Beethoven sonata is performed by a woman who's also recorded all the sonatas of Beethoven, Mozart, Prokofiev, and much of the rest of the piano repertoire? That's interesting and relevant.

I like to play for classes three performances of the Haydn "Surprise" Symphony theme. The first is by the Vienna Philharmonic. The second is a video of my then 5-yr old daughter and three friends playing a simplified string quartet arrangement I made for them and that they'd spent one hour learning. The third is my computer playing that arrangement. Obviously, the Vienna Phil wins hands down on most levels, although the computer's version is probably the most pitch-perfect. The interest, of course, is in the little-string-quartet-that-could version. It's horrible on most levels, but the joy of music-making and the wonderful crunch of the surprise chord come through beautifully. They really communicate something of the *meaning* of this music. Even the tune itself (so lush and elegant in the VPO version), has a refreshing folksy ruggedness about it in the kids' take. If a bunch of adults self-consciously tried to emulate this, we'd be talking about a farce that wouldn't be very interesting. But, because of who the kids are, it's charming, musical, and meaningful. It even helps me hear the music in a new way. (Yes, it's even more meaningful when it's your own kid playing.) Context is huge.

[UPDATE: You can now hear and see (sort of) the children playing [here](#). I intentionally blurred the video to protect the innocent.]

Whoops, that reminds me of another thing I've been thinking about: how much we in the classical music world need to hear things in a new way. I just read this [post](#) in which a musicologist is waxing enthusiastically about the prospects of hearing and even playing Chopin's newly discovered piano. He's



pretty honest about understanding that the ravages of time mean we won't learn all that much new from the instrument; but what the enthusiasm speaks to (in my opinion) is not so much a need to learn exactly what Chopin's music sounded like to him, although that's what every musicologist would say. What we really want is to be able to rediscover this music anew. Chopin's not going to be writing anything more for us, but perhaps we can learn something that lets us hear his music in a new way. In other words, we love the classics but we miss the fact that they're not new to us anymore. (The new music folks are jumping up and down saying, "we've got new stuff, we've got new stuff!" Aren't they cute?)

As much as the "performance practice" movement has done to help clear up our sense of history, I think what people have appreciated the most is the way it's let us hear old music in a new way. The first historically informed recordings of Handel's *Messiah* were such a breath of fresh air because we'd heard it the old way so many times. Now, I've seen that groups are giving *authentic* performances of Mozart's version of the *Messiah*, complete with added clarinets, etc. Time was, that would have seemed like something offensive to most musicologists, but now it's a chance to hear *Messiah* in yet another new way, and through Mozart's ears. Again, there's always the moral component; we need to have some good musicological reason to excuse these new versions (no one's interested in Michael Monroe's electropop version of *Messiah*) - and that's a good thing, generally speaking - but I still think the new experience is what's most important about these supposedly backwards-looking practices.

TUESDAY, MARCH 27, 2007

## Hyperspace

A month into my blogging career, I have to say that one of my favorite things about keeping this kind of journal is **hyperlinking**. I don't just mean the regular sort of blogroll links that connect blog to blog, but I love having the ability to connect thoughts so easily from one post to another. My psychiatrist wife has always thought I had a touch of A.D.D., but I like to think of it as a mind that is constantly hyperlinking. Of course, on some level, making connections from one idea to another is the way intelligence works. My hero, **Douglas Hofstadter**, is a researcher in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) and much of his research has focused on analogy-making as a sort of higher level sign of intelligent life. It should be no surprise that he likes to address AI questions by using all sorts of analogies and illustrations from the worlds of math, music, language, art, etc. What interests me the most about that is the idea that creativity is also so often about making connections, something I happened to touch lightly on in a recent **post**.

The farther out I get from school, the more I seem to find myself interested in all sorts of different **creative pursuits** - in addition to musical performance, this has included writing music, writing poetry, translating libretti, making movies, **blogging**, etc. I don't make any great claims when it comes to creative abilities, but I'm always struck by how often the crucial creative moment comes when the mind makes an unexpected or previously unnoticed connection between two somethings. It's kind of like an accident you've been designed to make. I once would've assumed I needed much more specific training to try some of these things out (and more training wouldn't hurt), but I've been surprised to discover that finding successful connections is often more intuitive than I would have expected. It's not much different than finding that perfect analogy.

When I was translating Gounod's ***The Doctor in Spite of Himself***, the moments when just the perfect rhyme would appear always felt like little miracles in which I suddenly married the right word or phrase with the right moment. In the case of translation, as Hofstadter beautifully **illustrates**, there's a sense in which one is always looking for the perfect analogy - how to express in English what Gounod's librettist expressed in French, for example. But whether it's writing a symphony or choosing colors for a quilt pattern, I think the heart of the creative process is generally the same. One's accumulated knowledge is used to help inspire the most interesting connections. It stands to reason that the creative mind is conditioned to be looking for connections, whether that's the task at hand or not, and I like to flatter myself that this is a reason I don't always focus well.

I don't mean at all to belittle the notion of more serious kinds of **A.D.D.**, but one of the ways in which I have always experienced attention deficit has been with reading fiction. Attention-distraction is probably a better way of putting it, but when I'm reading a long narrative (especially novels), I find it hard not to keep thinking about things I've already read when my enjoyment would be better served by focusing on what I'm reading. I'm always worried that I've missed something, some important connection. That doesn't mean that people who read fluently aren't thinking about what they're read - it makes no sense to think of 'reading' a long work if there's not a running thread of thought - but I struggle more than I should with keeping my topmost focus in the right place.

This can also manifest itself when watching movies, which is probably a reason that I tend to prefer watching movies I **already know**. There's naturally less concern about 'missing something.' On a fairly

trivial level, it used to drive me crazy to be watching a movie or TV show in which a familiar face showed up that I couldn't place; I might spend days trying to figure out where I'd seen that actor before. I used to dream about something like the Internet that would allow me simply to look up actors and see where else I might have seen them. Now that I know the answer to such questions is just a **few clicks** away, I find it easier not to get distracted by such things. So, this brings me back to my love for links and hyperlinks. They can actually put my hyper-mind at ease.

Even before the Internet came around, I had fallen in love with Apple's old **Hypercard** software which had its own built-in programming language. I think it's also notable that I've always preferred in-text **parenthetical citations** to those bottom-dwelling footnotes. There's a sense in which a hyperlink functions like a really amazing and more transparent parenthetical reference. The reader is invited to dig deeper into an idea, find a definition, or follow a citation as part of the natural flow of the prose. At their best, hyperlinks can let a reader make some of the same sorts of connections that the writer has made.

Yes, there's also something to be said for a good writer taking the reader on that journey through skillfully constructed prose that connects all the right dots without requiring links; we certainly have a general bias towards the idea that a gifted writer should lead us and not just provide a bunch of data that can be connected in various ways. As with just about everything, the ideal probably lies somewhere in the middle. Again I return to Hofstadter's *Le ton beau de Marot* and its patchwork structure. There's great delight in reading the chapters sequentially and I believe the author put a lot of good effort into connecting some very diffuse content. Still, many of the chapters also function pretty well on their own and the structure has a freedom about it that invites subsequent browsing. There's no question that I find this kind of reading more naturally pleasurable than reading fiction.

To summarize, let's just say that I waited more than half of my life for the Internet, and I'm so glad it's here - it fits my way of thinking to a T. Perhaps a better-ordered mind could keep a journal and also keep track of all the internal connections from entry to entry, but I much prefer this. That may mean I'm lazy or it may mean that I'm naturally creative. Or both. For me, it's great fun to be able to make those connections more explicit - and, yes, to send readers off to other interesting **hyper-spaces**. I've been saying for awhile that it can only be a matter of time before most textbooks are delivered online (or ondisc) exclusively because of the power of hyperlinks. For music textbooks particularly, with all the multimedia content, an online synthesis makes so much more sense than a **big fat textbook** accompanied by a big fat anthology of scores accompanied by a set of 12 CDs, etc. And, the resulting 'package' would *look* a lot more like how I think.

TUESDAY, APRIL 10, 2007

*Bell Failure*

The Bad Bard of the Blogosphere is back. I was there for you when **Joyce Hatto** needed ode-ing, and now this story is popping up all over, although at a fraction of Hatto levels. (It's a mere fraction of that story as well, so that's why this only gets two sonnets instead of **six**.)

As bloggers **here** and **there** have noted,  
 a fiddling Bell who's quite well known  
**went busking** in D.C. and toted  
 his Strad to play the Bach *Chaconne*.  
 He played his heart out for an hour.  
 He played with virtuoso power.  
 The passers-by went passing by  
 with hardly an attentive eye.  
 But why? When Mr. Bell is slated  
 to play the finest concert halls,  
 no seats are left; they line the walls  
 to hear him, even when inflated  
 demand means it costs much, much more  
 than sitting on a station floor.

So what's the moral of the story?  
 Are average folks so unaware  
 of beauty? Maybe, but before we  
 assume the worst, it's only fair  
 to mention that a subway station  
 is really not the best location  
 for Bach's *Chaconne* (which I adore -  
 it's just not made for train decor.)  
 The artist who ignores his context,  
 no matter if the talent's great,  
 is failing to communicate.  
 I hope that we can count upon, next  
 commute, a savvier setlist.  
 Then maybe beauty won't go missed.

I know he also played a little *Ave Maria*, etc., but I agree with **Elaine Fine** that the music wasn't very well-chosen for the venue. (She says everything I wanted to say, and quite eloquently, so sonnets were all I had left. Sorry.) The *Chaconne*, which I count among my 4 or 5 favorite pieces of music ever, is an almost unbearably intense piece that is best heard with rapt attention paid to its inexorable logic. If I happened to wander in on that scene from the top of an escalator, I'd certainly have stopped to listen, if only because I would've recognized Bell and been intrigued by the situation. I suspect, given the way crowds work, that if three or four such people had stopped to listen, their presence would have attracted more and it could've become a *scene*, but I'm not at all surprised it worked out as it did. However, if I didn't know the music, I suspect I would've found the playing a little much for that setting.

In fact, the couple of times I've heard Bell live, I've found his hyperintense mannerisms to be somewhat distracting - I can easily imagine that created a barrier for some who walked by. It's not the kind of playing that fades into the steelwork. I'm sure the quality of my laptop speakers is part of the problem, but when I first fired up one of the sample videos, my immediate reaction was that the sound was awfully strident for what I'd want to hear walking to the train - and I love this music and Joshua Bell's playing. Now I can't explain why Jeremy Denk didn't draw bigger crowds, but I can tell you I knew a **post** like this was coming.



MONDAY, MAY 7, 2007

### *Too good to be true?*

I already mentioned that my recent class on *The Rite of Spring* reminded me of Edith Piaf, and that sent my mind [here](#). From Stravinsky to the ridiculous in seconds flat. However, talking about the Stravinsky also reminded me of a fundamental tension in thinking about that work. Although it was created to evoke barbaric ritual, and although its premiere provoked a riot, it is now not just a happily settled musical masterwork; it is one of the ultimate orchestra/conductor showpieces. In other words, this scandalous depiction of low culture has become a signifier of success at the highest levels of culture. To pull this piece off (at least in today's terms) requires about a hundred meticulously trained anti-primitives. So, the question is, are we then left with something that really says anything about real primitivism?

Putting that question aside, it has me wondering if performances (and performances standards) can be *too* good. On one level, the answer is 'no,' but the question isn't so much a problem with spectacular technical achievement in its own right as it is how those achievements change the way we hear music. Since the classical world is, by **definition**, concerned with re-hearing repertoire over and over, it's only natural that the more we get to know certain masterworks, the more we'll notice whose performances stand out. There are established technical *standards* for works like the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* or *The Rite of Spring* that couldn't exist yet for brand-new music. Thus, especially for the connoisseur, the ability to enjoy a performance can become more and more about how that performance stacks up.

In my early days of record collecting, I had no problem buying mostly budget label LPs with no-name performers. In fact, I had some marvelous live experiences hearing the South Arkansas Symphony Orchestra debut various masterworks for me. This is not to put down those players (although the fact that I later became one of them doesn't improve my **opinion** of them), but I'm sure I'd hear them differently today. Still, my point isn't so much that "**the more you know, the less you like**," although that is a problem.

I'm just wondering if we underestimate the fact that some music has a certain appeal when it's not being immaculately transmitted. I thought of this first as I was telling my class about the riotous Stravinsky premiere while listening to an exquisitely controlled performance. Saint-Saëns supposedly stormed out at the premiere on hearing how the bassoon was **being misused**, but on most recordings that solo sounds divine. Maybe our ears have adjusted, but I suspect that in a pre-rite world, a bassoonist wouldn't have sounded so polished up there. It's probably fair to say that this unbassoonistic solo has become a solo every bassoonist aspires to play beautifully - but not shockingly or disturbingly. It's now very bassoonistic.

I thought of this issue again a couple of days later when I heard two very intermediate cellists rehearsing the Vivaldi *Concerto for 2 Cellos in G Minor* with a junior orchestra. I love that piece and have accompanied other intermediate-level cellists playing it several times - and I think it sounds great that way! There's a wonderfully scruffy/scrubby quality to the writing that makes inelegant playing pay off; I think I may honestly enjoy that piece more that way than I do hearing it played by professionals. Of course, this partially has to do with my association; maybe if I'd heard it first played by pros, I'd think otherwise. I **made** this point before in a more extreme way with this **example**.

So what's my point? I don't know. I'm not arguing for us to drop technical standards. I was just listening to Gary Graffman tear his way through Balakirev's *Islamey*, and the virtuosity is absolutely thrilling. It's just one of those every-gain-has-a-loss situations. We teach *The Rite of Spring* as something scandalous, but it's really lost all sense of scandal; if the NY Philharmonic performed it today exactly as it was performed at its premiere, there might be a riot, but only because the playing would be heard as severely substandard.

One of the first Jeremy Denk posts that really attracted my attention was [this one](#) about Charles Ives. Denk is basically struggling with the issue of music that sounds *too* composed and civilized:

Just the other day I was playing through [Tzigane](#) with Josh, in a rehearsal, and it was all a great deal of fun, and Josh sounded fabulous of course, and I was annoyed that I didn't sound so fabulous in that annoying passage with the repeated notes ... but I was thinking "it's good, but it's no Charles Ives." Even the "dirty" gypsy notes in that piece sound clean, organized, shiny; everything is polished, glittering, sparkling, lush, perfectly voiced: sanitized? It smelt of [PineSol](#), if [PineSol](#) were French. But not with Ives; he captures the Down & Dirty better than almost anyone. If he errs, he errs on the Dirty side; but his dirt is not vulgar, it is transcendental fertile earth with lots of terrific spiritual manure. Perhaps the hyper-cleanliness of Ravel is somewhat vulgar, in comparison with the honest, sprawling dirtiness of Ives? ... at least that's the way I feel. Bring on the hate mail!

The subject of one of the twenty books I may never write is the tension created when beautifully crafted artworks are about awful things. In the fascinating book, [Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?](#), A. D. Nuttall talks about the problem of art that "glorifies the inglorious." (I'm not sure of the original source of that phrase, but I like it.) He quotes a C. S. Lewis article which, naturally, gets right to the point: "Can we wholly avoid the suspicion that tragedy . . . is our final attempt to see the world as the world is not?" ("Tragic Ends," *Encounter*, vol. xviii (Feb. 1962), p. 98). When a Shakespearean character gives a noble speech before dying, the problem may not just be that the situation is unreal; it's that the eloquence of the moment may cloud our vision with respect to the horror that's being depicted.

In the same way, composers and performers often find themselves straddling that line between communicating something rough and primitive (Beethoven's *Pastoral* peasants, for example) while being smooth and sophisticated. There are passages in Ives' *Psalm 90*, which I was listening to this weekend, that seem to defy any possibility of elegance. (e.g. "We are consumed by thine anger.") Even when they're right, they sound wrong. And maybe that's right.

SATURDAY, MAY 19, 2007

## *A taste of 1825*

I can't imagine trying to do this without the inspiration of the many excellent blogs that provide regular food for thought. (Speaking of which, thanks to [Terry Teachout](#) and [OboeInsight](#) for the kind mentions.) So it is that Matthew Guerrerri's ever-informative [Soho the Dog](#) has two seemingly disconnected posts which have run together in my mind. The [first](#) has to do with Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the author of *The Physiology of Taste*. I'm going to confess that I'd never heard of Brillat-Savarin or his book, and I'm sure he and his fans would be offended by my unsophisticated palate. (I think I've lowered my brow enough with the [Haydn-bashing](#), so I'm not going to reveal any diet details here.)

Guerrerri's point is that Brillat-Savarin also loved music and spoke highly of its aesthetic merits, but judged the life of the gourmand to be more satisfying. The Frenchman reasoned that dining, with all its attendant sensual and social pleasures, is a dependable, every-day activity. "Music," he counters, "has powerful attractions for those who love it; but one must set about it: - it is an exertion." This immediately struck me as odd, partially because when first reading it I didn't know Brillat-Savarin was writing in 1825. Here in 2007, very little exertion is needed to enjoy the highest levels of music-making - assuming, that is, that one is content with recordings.

I was thinking of this sea change while reading Guerrerri's [article](#) about the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's upcoming "rock'n'roll" concert. The point there is to look at composers who've been unabashedly influenced by the rock'n'roll riff-raff, especially when it comes to exploring sounds beyond the typical *acoustic* palette of the concert hall. One could argue about the degree to which the classical types have accepted synthesized sounds and instruments; in my experience, the electronic stuff is still pretty peripheral, except in one hugely important area: recordings. Recordings have come to define classical music in so many ways, it's no exaggeration to say that it's already a very electronic world.

True, we like to pretend that recording is a transparent medium in which acoustic performances are transmitted to us unadulterated. Oh, except we might cut and paste them together from multiple takes, just so you won't have to hear the same mistakes over and over. Oh, and we might tweak the balances a little bit - just so you can hear every acoustic nuance produced by that beloved soloist. Oh, and we might speed things up a bit to make it more impressive - NO, that would [never](#) happen. But, the bottom line assumption is that classical recordings aren't *about* electronics - they're *about* the music.

Ah yes, that's an interesting distinction that opens its own can of worms. (I opened [that can](#) a little while back. I'm going to open it again. Hope you have a taste for worms.) First of all, it's much easier to think that a performance is mainly *about* the music (as opposed to such little elements as the performers, an audience, a shared experience, etc.) when it's disembodied into electronic form. To illustrate, let's return to that 1825 perspective [*cue blurring visuals and whirring time-travel arpeggios*]:

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin: Oh t'cuisine! This dinner is delightful.

Jean's Imaginary But Engaging Spouse: Yes, I'd say this experience transcends the mere mundane function of providing nourishment.

JABS: Agreed. *[pause]* Remind me who you are.

JIBES: I'm not sure. You were quoted on Soho the Dog's blog as saying "A married pair of gourmands have at least once a day a pleasant opportunity of meeting . . . and have a subject of conversation which is always new; they speak not only of what they eat, but also of what they have eaten, what they will eat, what they have seen elsewhere, of fashionable dishes, new inventions, and so forth. Everyone knows that such a familiar chit-chat is delightful." However, [Wikipedia](#) says you were never married, so I'm here to be your theoretical spouse.

JABS: What a memory you have! I did say all that about the pleasures of table chat. You have to remember the TV hasn't been invented yet, so dinner conversation still serves a useful purpose.

JIBES: What would you like to discuss first? The food in front of us, the food we ate yesterday, or the food we'll eat tomorrow?

JABS: I think you may be overthinking this; our conversation needn't be so contrived. Now, did you happen to hear the one about the E-flat Major rondo theme that gets broken apart at the end?

JIBES: Is this a joke?

JABS: Well, yes, it's from the last movement of Haydn's *Joke* quartet. You see, a lively presto theme goes into a 6/8 bar -

JIBES: It's 1825, Jean. Haydn's a thing of the past.

JABS: No, no, you don't understand. He was a comic genius with appeal far beyond his time. If we did have TV, he'd have had his own sitcom for sure.

JIBES: Shouldn't we be talking about food?

JABS: I'm talking about food that nourishes the soul. As I once [wrote](#), "Taste is not so richly endowed as hearing; the latter can appreciate and compare many sounds at the same time; but taste, on the other hand, is actually simple—that is to say, that two flavours at one are equally inappreciable."

JIBES: What about sweet'n'sour pork?

JABS: Never heard of it. But consider the pleasures of Haydn as he invites us to savor four parts at once independent, yet harmonious. Why, the rondo theme itself -

JIBES: Nothing is so tiresome as hearing someone talk about music. It's like cooking.

JABS: You're right. You need to *hear* this music to really get it. You play violin, right?

JIBES: Sure; being imaginary, I can be anything you want me to be.



JABS: Great. Now it's **been said** that I was "good enough to play first violin in a New York theater orchestra," so I'll take violin 1, and I'll get my chef to play viola -

JIBES: I didn't know he played.

JABS: He doesn't, but it's just a viola part.

JIBES: But what are we going to do about a cellist?

JABS: Well, it's not like I just carry them around in my pocket. Perhaps I can get my valet to play the cello part on the piano. It's a compromise, but at least it should be in tune.

JIBES: Speaking of which, did you say this is in E-flat major; I always have intonation problems in the flat keys.

JABS: Oh, that's not a problem; we can play it in E Major and, assuming we're still working near Baroque pitch here in 1825, it'll come out more or less in E-flat.

JIBES: So now you're asking me to transpo -

JABS: Oh, sacrebleu! I just remembered the house viola isn't playable right now. Chef Kaga misunderstood a joke I made about the difference between a viola and an onion. I guess we'll have to cover both viola and cello on the piano.

JIBES: This sure seems like a lot of exertion just to hear a bit of music.

JABS: You know, you're right. [*makes a note to himself*]. Forget Haydn. Now, about this brie . . .

[*cue more blurring and whirring. It's now 2007.*]

JIBES: What's for dinner?

JABS: Well, it's *Iron Chef* night, so how about some Japanese take-out? I'm getting tired of French food.

JIBES: Maybe we should try some of that fusion cuisine. I saw Rachael Ray has a candy sushi **recipe**.

JABS: Great idea. Those inter-continental flavors always make me think of the exotic, Oriental influences one finds in the music of Debussy and Ravel.

JIBES: Speaking of international, I just read that Ravel wrote a little piece called *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn*? A French salute to an Austrian, I suppose. Do you know it?

JABS: Know it? I'm crazy about it. I've got six recordings right here [*pulling iPod from pocket*], four on piano and two in the orchestral version. My favorite is Casadesus' restrained interpretation. I much prefer when the performer doesn't get in the way of the music. Just listen. [*fitting her with headphones*]Such taste. Such refinement.

JIBES: Mm-hmm. But it's 8 o'clock. We can listen to Ravel any time; *Iron Chef* is on now! [*fade to black*]

I had no idea that dialogue was going to happen until I typed the phrase "Let's return to that 1825 perspective." It's now a long time since I started this post, but I hope our little play has made its point.

For 1825's Brillat-Savarin, the existence of music on a page was no guarantee that he could experience the pleasures therein. Now, virtually the entire standard repertoire has been converted many times over into *electronic* music that's ready on demand. But it is electronic, if not so much in sound as in what it means for our reception of it.

I love recordings, and I almost certainly wouldn't be a musician today without having been inspired by them. But, I suspect their existence has done more than anything to create this idea that we can listen to music objectively. That just as a printed score is something fixed (seemingly), so a library full of CD's gives us the impression that the score realized in sound can be fixed, permanent, authentic, etc. Thus, people were perplexed that recordings attributed to **Joyce Hatto** could have received less glowing reviews when previously associated with no-name performers. The fact is, it is now possible and quite common to listen to music with no regard for the performers. I find this happens with students all the time. I've had many submit papers in which specific recordings were analyzed with no mention made of the performers.

Still, knowing (or knowing about) the performer can add an important layer of meaning. I thought of this when Jeremy Denk **posted** his homemade recording of the *Allemande* from Bach's *D major Partita* as the culmination of his 7-day allemandethon. I'd already sampled many other recordings of the work throughout the week and had played through it many times myself, but I certainly listened to his recording differently knowing what I'd learned about his relationship to the piece. I don't see anything wrong with saying all of that context thoroughly enriched my listening, that my baseline empathy for his playing was higher than if I'd known nothing about him; but that seems to go against the prevailing wisdom that a performance should stand on its own.

The funny thing is that, in arguing for more openness about this kind of subjectivity, I'm accidentally making an argument in favor of the star system that has long dominated the classical recording industry. As much as I don't like that, it's helpful to realize that people want to put a face with what they're hearing. If that face looks like Joshua Bell or Janine Jansen . . . well, that *shouldn't* be the point. So, partly as an overreaction against it, we like to pretend that the music speaks for itself. But, Denk's insights into Bach aren't just insights into the music; they're insights into *his* conception of the music. That's an important difference, and it helps ensure that the electronic doesn't become inhuman. [UPDATE: I just re-read this and realized this conclusion could be a lot clearer. Well, now I have something else to blog about.]

TUESDAY, JULY 31, 2007

## *Translation/Transcription/Transimpson*

As a manifestation of my interest in connection-making, observe as I make connections among my last three posts. In my most recent **musings**, I wrote about the wonderful potential for iPod shuffling to create interesting and unexpected connections and suggested that perception of art has a lot to do with making our own connections with what we see/hear/read/etc. Before that, I "translated" **Stravinsky** and **myself** into *Simpsons* form, and even transformed the *Simpsons* theme into Stravinsky, Bach, and Mozart. "Simp"ly put, the process of translation is my favorite pet topic in the world of aesthetics, whether the subject is **translating a poem** from French to English, transcribing a **concerto accompaniment** from orchestra to piano, or transimpsoning a real-world image into *Simpsons* yellow. What I find most interesting is the question of how identity is maintained for a given subject when it passes from one medium to another, even as the medium (new language) demands that something be lost. Obviously, connections are key.

For example, if Stravinsky were to appear in a *Simpsons* episode, it would be odd to create photorealistic animations of the real Stravinsky like so:



The following makes much more sense:

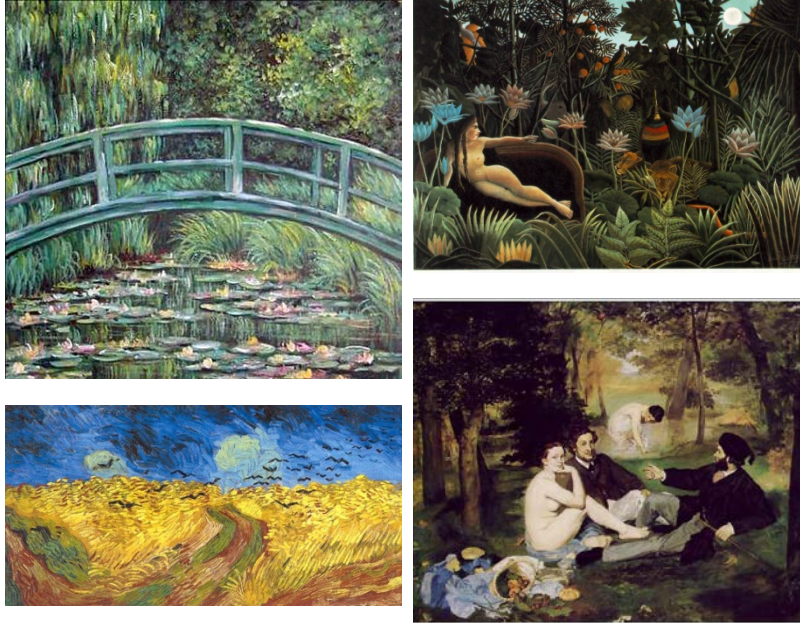


Stravinsky becomes more real "in the *Simpsons* world" by becoming less like what he really looks like. In this thought experiment, *The Simpsons* functions as a sort of visual language into which images of people and objects may be translated. For me or Stravinsky to keep our identity in the new world, we have to be transformed; yet, there is something maintained (with more or less success) that enables us to see the connection between the real thing and the *Simpsons* thing. Translation necessarily involves changes, yet it also depends on certain recognizable identity features being maintained (e.g. Stravinsky's nose, my goatee, the melody, rhythms, and harmonies of a concerto, etc.) Thus, translation can help reveal what we perceive as more or less essential to identity recognition.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from one of my all-time favorite *Simpsons* episodes: "**The Crepes of Wrath**." When Bart first arrives in France as an exchange student, his host drives him through the countryside and we see, in quick succession, the following background scenes:



Obviously, these make reference to the following famous paintings by Monet, Van Gogh, Manet, and Rousseau, but their distinctive styles have been translated into the visual language of the *Simpsons* so that, in the context of the show, they are more real representations of these artists than if the animators had just put photorealistic reproductions of the paintings in the background:



---

The process is not much different than having a German-speaking audience hear Shakespeare in German; that makes for an experience that is simultaneously less true to the real Shakespeare (because the English is lost) and more true (because the audience understands much more of the underlying content). The use of the French paintings is also a good example of how art can function as a cultural sign; even for the viewer who may not recognize what's going on in those brief seconds, the reference to iconic paintings, which ironically are not particularly realistic to begin with, makes a stronger "this is France" statement than more realistic French countryside imagery might. Isn't art something? And how 'bout those *Simpsons* creators, tucking art history so subtly into the narrative? Maybe **Barbara Bush** would have thought more highly of them if she knew that.



SUNDAY, AUGUST 12, 2007

## *Transcription as a Metaphor for Listening*

A well-known blogger with a perfectly named blog, **Sounds and Fury**, has directed a bit of his **fury** towards the feeble sound quality of iPod and their seriously compressed mp3 files. I've written **before** that I'm less bothered by this problem than some. Curiously it comes down to my complete agreement with part 1 and complete disagreement with part 2 of the following statement from Mr. S&F: "a live performance is quite literally an irreproducible benchmark, and the only true and fully acceptable means of experiencing classical music." While I might leave the door open for some technological development that could overcome the first problem, I don't even know what it means to say that an experience is only "true and fully acceptable" if heard live. Aside from the obvious authority questions about who decides what is true and fully acceptable, the statement just makes no sense. It's clear from reading the S&F blog that recordings play an important role in that writer's musical experience; in what way are such experiences not true or fully acceptable?

The basic problem here is to assume, as people commonly do, that music can simply be defined as the sounds generated in performance. On one level, that's a fine definition, but to be understood as a meaningful experience, we have to consider what the listener hears and how he/she makes sense of it. If the "true and fully acceptable" sounds of a Mahler symphony fall in a forest and no one hears them, they may as well not have sounded. (Let's forget, for a second, that the live performers producing the music would have to hear the sounds.) If they fall on an audience of listeners with no cultural context in which to understand Mahler, the musical communication will hardly be any stronger than with the empty forest, although certainly something will be experienced. However, it's surely the case that these out-of-context listeners will hear less *of the music* than a Mahler devotee would listening to a 1940's mono recording played on a scratchy old record player.

The level of "aural authenticity" is just one of many factors that are involved in "experiencing classical music" or any music. The more recordings have become a part of the music world, the more the sound of recorded music has become a part of the natural musical experience - in much pop music, the recorded route IS the experience, as I mentioned **here**. Sure, there are many uniquely special aspects of live performance, but given that we hear with our minds, it's amazing what one can hear that one doesn't actually hear. As I **wrote** awhile back:

I suppose the more one trains oneself to be concerned about audio quality, the more one is likely to be distracted by its absence. However, I think this again speaks to the fact that music lives in our response to it - not in the sound waves that send it to our ears. This is why a Beethoven was able to compose when he was deaf. Of course it must have been awful for him not to hear what he wrote, but the meaning of the music he could still perceive using the same mental pathways that we use. He couldn't connect them to aural events - but he could, in many ways, still have an aural experience.

Now I would agree that Beethoven was never able to have the ideal aural experience of his own 9th symphony, but it would be absurd to suggest that he couldn't have a "true" experience of it. His experience of it, even in the solitude of his own room, was probably more authentic than that of most listeners. That seems like an odd idea, to suggest that music can happen without sounds, but musical

experience can certainly take place in silence. So, why shouldn't music also be truly experienceable when the sound quality is just substandard?

[By the way, a statement like **this** - "but the music contained in these [mp3] files represents less than 10 percent of the original music on the CDs" - is silly as well. The fact that the digital space used to store the audio is only 10% is far from the saying the resulting audio is only 10%, especially because the compression is designed quite specifically to help preserve the very aural information that we're most likely to interpret. Since the music is "what we hear," it's fair to say that a lot of the lost information isn't "music to our ears" anyway. That doesn't mean nothing is lost, but I can't think of any meaningful way in which that could be called a 90% loss of music.]

All of this has made me think a bit more profoundly about the process of transcription, which is already one of my **favorite topics**. My love for transcription probably started with the years I've spent "being the orchestra" in countless hours accompanying concerti, choral works, opera scenes, arias, etc. Especially because I generally know what the orchestra part sounds like, it can be amazingly satisfying to simulate that at the keyboard, even though *much* more sonic data is lost than with the worst mp3 compression. It's often remarked that 2-piano arrangements were the phonographs of the 19th century. Short of getting to a concert, the best way to hear one of those old Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven symphonies was via such homemade experiences.

Of course, a piano transcription isn't the truest experience of an orchestral piece, although the nature of Western music up until the 20th century is such that melody, harmony, and rhythm are arguably much more essential to a work's identity than timbre issues. A piano transcription of a Haydn symphony makes much more sense than one of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (although piano versions of the Debussy exist!); a piano transcription of *Poème électronique* makes almost no sense, but most common practice music allows a piano to present a "compressed" reduction of orchestral music in a quite meaningful way.

What I'd never thought of is that our ears are, in a sense, transcribing everything we hear. Just as a Liszt version of a Beethoven symphony does its best to keep the essentials intact, and just as an mp3 does its best to keep the e-ssentials intact, our ears do their best to make the most sense out of whatever comes through. Even when the sounds are live, the information might be "compressed" because of a noisy neighbor, a passing fire-engine, a bad cold - or by the mind's inability to parse everything that's coming in. For certain listeners, a Beethoven symphony and a Debussy tone poem might sound more similar than a Beethoven symphony and its piano transcription. To more culturally conditioned hears, the two Beethoven's would have much more in common with each other than the Debussy. The mind is always translating what the ear provides into a listening experience.

Yes, there's nothing (yet) to match the thrill of hearing a live performance (not to mention the thrill of being there *in the moment*), but the sounds are only part of the experience. There are all sorts of arguments to be made about the adverse effects of turning classical music into a recorded phenomenon, but decrying the widespread use of iPods is really going after a fairly innocuous byproduct of all this. I, for one, am thankful that mp3 compression allows me to cart many days worth of music with me in the car. Even if the experience isn't "fully acceptable," I know I'm getting much more than 10%, and sometimes I get musical experiences that make my day or even change my life. And you know why? Because the mind is a pretty darn good compressor as well. It can take infinite

sensory stimuli (road noise, honking horns, air conditioning, stupid bumper stickers) and compress them into just me and Poulenc's *Fleurs*. I can live with that.

[UPDATE: I should have added to that last paragraph that the mind doesn't just compress (or distill) what it hears - it also can add all sorts of information to what is heard, filling in the blanks so to speak. "Hearing what's not there" may be the best summary of what I find intriguing about transcription.]



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2007

## *Tradition!*

An inevitable downside of being a slow blogger of late is that one of the many potential blogging ideas that's been floating around in my head was just beautifully articulated by someone else. It's possible that the ultimate meaning of this is that everything I want to say will eventually be said by someone else if I just wait long enough. Anyway, *Dial M for Musicology's* Jonathan Bellman recently made a **point** I've been meaning to make about Gustavo Dudamel and the dazzling system of Venezuelan youth orchestras - namely, that this system is unapologetically grounded in The Canon of Western art music. As Bellman notes, the poor Canon has taken quite a beating in the last few decades with more and more concern that it's too past-centric, and masterpiece-centric, and Euro-centric, etc. In fact, the postmodern mindset has done well to remind us that much of how we look at the past is colored by tradition, cultural bias, etc. OK, fine.

On the other hand, sometimes it's worth remembering that these very traditions (how we think about the past) can be as important as the foundational masterpieces that comprise them. Ways of thinking about cultural objects become cultural objects themselves. Yes, there are entire schools of thinking about music that distort music history - the legendary Russian schools of piano and violin playing, for example (see below) - but at some point, these traditions and some of their handed-down distortions become invaluable as well, and that includes very strict and disciplined ideas about how to become a good orchestra musician. No, there's absolutely no reason why a Central American musical training program should be aiming to produce orchestras which excel in the music of Beethoven, Mahler, and Shostakovich - but, clearly, many non-Western cultures still find this to be a compelling and inviting tradition that isn't remotely dead.

Trying to argue for cultural superiority on behalf of the Western tradition may well be a dead-end street - or at least an invitation to have Richard Taruskin **lay the smack down**. Still, there must be something special about this tradition, because getting to be *that* good (*El Sistema* good) at it takes a LOT of hard work. Does the evidence that so many people will devote so many hours to mastering the intricacies of so many difficult instruments mean that Western classical music is better than other types of music? Well, that's hardly a satisfying proof - people put unimaginable amounts of energy into all sorts of things I don't care about. Still, it's something.

I kind of miss the days when I never worried about such things. I've recently been re-reading Gary Graffman's 1981 autobiography, *I Really Should Be Practicing*. It's a very lighthearted book, but I think one way it influenced me as a young pianist was that I completely bought into the world it describes of young pianists completely devoted to becoming great concert pianists in the grand old tradition. It never occurred to me as I leapt into training that the classical world wouldn't always exist as it did in the 1940s and 50's he vividly describes. It's a little off-topic, but my favorite story is how he insisted on playing a passage in Schumann's *Carnaval* as indicated in the score rather than as taught by Isabelle Vengerova, his great Russian teacher. She was outraged, insulted and humiliated. As Graffman tells it:

"Finally, she did admit that during my performance, when the shock of that scandalous moment had passed, [great Russian violinist, Efram] Zimbalist had leaned over toward her and whispered, "Is it really written like that in the music?" She confessed that she had then

explained to him, "Yes, but nobody..." with exasperation, to me: "As you well know, Gary...nobody...*nikto*....*ni kagda*...*personne jamais*...IT JUST ISN'T DONE!"

That sums up so much of the teaching I heard in years of accompanying violin, cello, and voice lessons taught by important pedagogues. IT JUST ISN'T DONE! Obviously, it can seem silly to say that one shouldn't follow Schumann's clear directions because the cultural consensus is that it's better another way, but this kind of teaching is, for better or worse, an essential part of the classical tradition. Actually, Kenneth Woods recently took an **excellent look** at the negative side of this "secret handshake" way of teaching, and I agree with a lot of what he says. In fact, I agree too much because, as a teacher, my biggest fault is that I don't like to impose my will on students. Even when a student plays a wrong note, there's often a voice inside saying, "maybe he really feels it that way." Still, this opinionated, intuitive approach to music-making is an inescapable part of the music world - and part of me knows that my happiest musical memories have had to do not with worrying about what makes Beethoven relevant, but with being exposed to the evangelical zeal of the true believers who never worry about such silly questions.

And now I've sailed off course and am in danger of having another blog post sink to the bottom of the drafts folder. What's my point? My point is that there's nothing wrong with embracing not just the music, but also much of the culture of music-making that's been handed down to us. For example, I love the old yellow Schirmer *24 Italian Songs and Arias*, which figures in just about every voice student's experience. Although most of the songs are from the 17th and 18th centuries, the collection is very much of the late 19th century, with wonderfully pianistic accompaniments. There are now competing editions that try to return these songs to their roots by filtering out all that Romantic interpretation, thinning out the piano textures, etc.

What's funny about that to me is that the songs have survived and been useful for more than a century because of their 19th century incarnations. If someone wants to dig up the old roots, that's fine, but there's nothing wrong with understanding the "yellow book" as its own authentic source. The same could be said for some of the outdated editions of Vivaldi concerti that show up in the Suzuki repertoire. Which is the real Vivaldi *A Minor*, the one Vivaldi wrote, or the version played by thousands upon thousands of young violinists? (For the record, I prefer some of the more interesting passagework that shows up in the Suzuki version. I'm not sure of the source of that version. Future blog topic?)

Wow, I'm drifting ever further outward. I've really got to stop and I'm really tired of having no new posts, so to recap: The Western classical art music tradition ain't so bad; it's embraced by all sorts of non-Western, non-elite cultures and it's got its own pretty lively, breathing internal culture. I like it.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2007

## *Saving the best for first*

I mentioned in my Tools of Engagement [post](#) how much I love Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante*, but as I've listened to it several times in the past week, I've also realized that my affection for this music has an odd little hang-up: my very favorite part is the very first entrance of the violin and viola soloists in the first movement. In other words, the moment that I look forward to the most takes place about 2 minutes into a 30-minute work. It's not that I don't enjoy the rest of the piece, but that soloists' entry is the highlight for me - we get to hear it one more time during the recap and that's it.

As with so much sublime Mozart, it's hard to put into words (warning: feeble attempt ahead) what makes this so satisfying, although you can hear and see for yourself [here](#). (The solo parts begin at about 2:14; note that in this case Fischer and Nikolic have been playing along with the orchestra from the beginning.) The first thing that struck me in thinking about this opening is that pedal tones are prominent; I've written [several times](#) in the past that I'm putty in the hands of a perfect pedal point passage. In a sense, the way a pedal point passage functions is a sort of stripped-down, elemental picture of how Tonality works. In tonal music, there is almost always the sense that a certain pitch acts as a center of gravity for our hearing - with a pedal point, we just get to hear the center explicitly. (Except when it's not explicit. In Mystislav Rostropovich's inspiring [discussion](#) of a dominant pedal in Bach's 3rd cello suite, he makes the point that he hears the pedal pitch sustaining for much longer than just the measures where it's actually sounded - the power of suggestion is so strong that, until that dominant is resolved, we hear it without hearing it.)

The entire 71-bar [intro](#) to the *Sinfonia Concertante* functions essentially like a tonic pedal, even though only about 40 of those measures have a sustained E-flat - the bars where E-flat is not omnipresent are generally short cadential patterns that are also reinforcing the tonic, so it's basically two minutes of building tension over an E-flat. (Curiously, perhaps the most famous of all pedal points is the sustained E-flat with which Wagner's *Ring* commences; however, that music could hardly be more different than this.) It might seem odd to say that tension is building since E-flat is the home pitch, but Mozart manages to achieve the sense of expectation in several ways, not least in the *sfp*'s of the two opening bars. One of the many features I like about the Fischer/Nikolic performance is the way these opening bars are handled; in some respects it's a very formulaic fanfare opening, but it's also a good example of how much articulation can matter. First a full-measure tonic chord is struck loudly and immediately turns soft, followed by a half-measure repeat of this gesture, followed finally by a half-measure dotted figure which seems to explode from the sublimated energy of the first two chords.

[see example on next page]

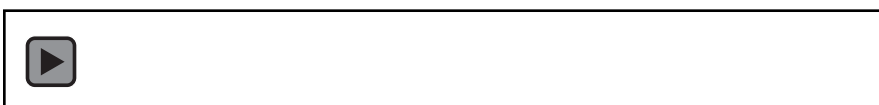
**Allegro maestoso**



Now we're on our way, but the tension really builds from **1:29 to 1:49** with a series of trills rising in a chromatic pattern over the same E-flat. (Nikolic looks like a jack-in-the-box about to pop during this section, and he clearly loves playing the climactic viola section trills that follow.) Of course, in some respects the most important tension is our built-in expectation that the soloists need to begin soloing; in this case, however, rather than a grand entrance, the violin and viola appear unobtrusively over yet another pedal tone against the soft pull of dominant harmonies.

Mozart's flair for coloristic subtlety is quite in evidence here; the soloists are merely adding two more octaves of E-flat to the existing pedal, so for their first two sustained measures they add nothing melodically, harmonically, or rhythmically. Rather, they provide a wonderful registral expanse, as if these upper harmonics of the pedal have just naturally blossomed out of the texture, which literally rises up to greet them. They become more present as the orchestra thins back downward and finally cadences into a full E-flat harmony - the way in which Mozart subtly orchestrates (in the strict and broad sense of the term) the emergence of these octave e-flats is perfectly judged, and we're left with the impression that this sonority has existed all along.

[see example on next page]



And what a sonority it is, like some better-than-possible violin which can play octaves without the usual tension one hears in a single instrument. I'd never realized, until looking at the score recently, that the viola part calls for a *scordatura* tuning. By tuning its strings up a half-step (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat), E-flat Major becomes a brilliant, sonorous key for the viola in which the open strings will naturally resonate much more often than with conventional tuning. Of course, this helps to offset the usual advantage of the more brilliant violin tone.

Even though the orchestra does resolve to an E-flat tonic chord after two bars, there's an inherent tension in those floating, emerging soloists' E-flats - a tension created by the fact that we still haven't gone anywhere, the opposite of the more normal dominant pedal effect where we're aching to get back to the tonic. The prolonged tonic tension has inspired a sort of wanderlust, so it's actually rather freeing when the "violinola" (Mozart still indulging in the sweet octave doubling) descends from its pedal perch with a liquid melody, really not much more than an ornamented scale down to the next set of E-flats. From there, the fanfare idea returns to signal the beginning of . . . well, the rest of the piece with its expected back-and-forth between violin and viola, etc. But it's that first magical entrance that I'm always left remembering and wanting to hear again.

I know it's not unusual for the soloist(s) entry to be memorable in a concerto (dozens of examples come to mind), but it's striking when one's favorite part of a work comes so soon. Other such examples I can think of are also from the Classical period: the *adagio* entrance of the violin soloist in Mozart's A Major concerto fits the bill for me, but even more striking is the *adagio* introduction to his so-called "Dissonant" String Quartet, K. 465. I think that's one of the most extraordinary pages ever written, and I'm always left a little underwhelmed by all that follows. The same could be said of the wonderfully mysterious first pages of Haydn's *Creation*, after which it's pretty much all downhill, a few rousing choruses aside.

As a matter of fact, my much too-wordy attempt above to summarize the beauty of 10 Mozartean seconds reminds me of reading this fine blog [post](#) by Kenneth Woods. In it, he rhapsodizes at length on the subtleties of the introduction to Haydn's *Symphony No. 92*. When I read the post, I was struck by two things: 1) I know that symphony well, having been taught it and taught it several times, and while I

agree that those measures are beautifully written, they're not quite as awe-inspiring to me as they are to Woods. 2) That said, it's by far my favorite part of that whole 4-movement symphony. I'm sure I'm guilty of a 19th-century aesthetic bias here, but it's as if these Classical composers put some of their best drama right up front, followed by nice, elegant comfort music. (Hideous simplification, I admit.) Of course, the Romantics took that flair for mysterious scene-setting and built entire scenes out of such mystery, and I guess I'm a hopeless Romantic.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2007

*Classical Vanity*

Driving home from Thanksgiving Dinner tonight (in our brand-new, mid-life crisis inducing minivan), my eyes were caught by a license plate that read: **387 ANO**. It caught my eyes because, in spite of my ever deteriorating memory for such things, the **387** immediately declared itself to me as the Köchel number for one of Mozart's well-known quartets. I'll be honest and admit that at the time I thought it was the number for the "Dissonant" quartet, even though I'd correctly ID'd that as K. 465 in my last **post**. I now realize K. 387 is a different well-known quartet, one that showed up in a couple of classes I took way back when; like baseball fans for whom **56**, **406**, and **714** are immediate triggers, musicians inevitably find that certain numbers have strong associations.

After spending a little time trying to make sense of the **ANO**, my thoughts soon turned to other possibilities for classical music vanity plates. After all, what's more vain than a musician showing off his knowledge of catalog numbers and the like? I made up my own informal rules for this. Licenses that pair numbers and letters in the usual manner are best, and awkward abbreviations are a virtual must. (Anyone could come up with the likes of **CARMEN** or **HANON**.) I like plates that are just obscure enough to make someone feel smart for getting it, but I didn't want to get too random. (No references to the catalogs of Telemann or C.P.E. Bach.) The final rule was not to spend too much time on this, so here's a quick and informal list, in no particular order, of plates I'd like to see:



[Most are pretty obvious, but clicking the licenses should answer any questions.]

[UPDATE: Since posting, I added the graphics, including the "authentic" plate you see up above. Of course, were I to try fleeing the scene with such a license number, I'd be making things much easier for the cops. "Yeah, officer, the plates definitely said EZK 545 - just like my kid **played** at last week's recital -I'll never forget - I could read'em 'cause first he started driving away nice and innocent, like he hadn't done nothing wrong. Two blocks of that, with me following along in my little Alberti ride - it's Italian - and then he takes off, starts doin' u-turns this way and that - I couldn't keep up - which is funny, 'cause my boy couldn't play those scales in tempo either. I lost'im when he hit G street, but I know that was the number, EZK 545 - and you can tell he's arrogant, driving so recklessly and calling that sonata easy. You expect that kind of attitude with a sports car, but he was in a minivan. Probably has kids of his own, poor things..."]

UPDATE 2: Sarah and Rob have **suggested** the following. (I hope I got them right.):





SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2007

## *The Metamorphosis of Don Juan?*

### A Bold, New Discovery

(which probably isn't new, and which certainly involved no boldness)

I've written twice before about my experiences with "found music": 1) **once**, when I was entranced by the strange, loopy **experience** of hearing works by Mozart and Handel simultaneously; 2) **later**, when my iPod shuffled **logically** from Stravinsky to the Beatles, due to an odd coincidence of sustained tension and a connecting pitch. The connection I just stumbled on tonight is much less random than either of those and may well have been observed by many before, but I haven't Googled any mentions of it. In fact, it's quite startling given its implications.

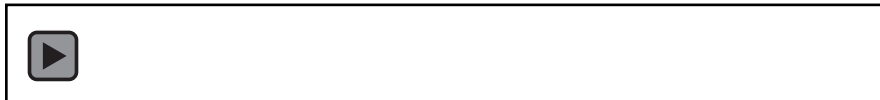
Here's what happened. I was listening to Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* on iTunes while doing some work at the computer (if "surfing the net" can be called work). *Don Juan* is a brilliant orchestral showpiece, but it ends quite solemnly, as described here by Alex Ross in *The Rest is Noise*: "an upward-scuttling scale in the violins, a quiet drumroll, hollow chords on scattered instruments, three thumps, and silence." (14) I don't actually know *Don Juan* all that well, but I slowly realized the music playing had ceased to be *Don Juan* - in fact, iTunes had segued right into the next work on the playlist, Strauss's *Metamorphosen*. I skipped back to the end of *Don Juan* and discovered how seamless the transition had been:



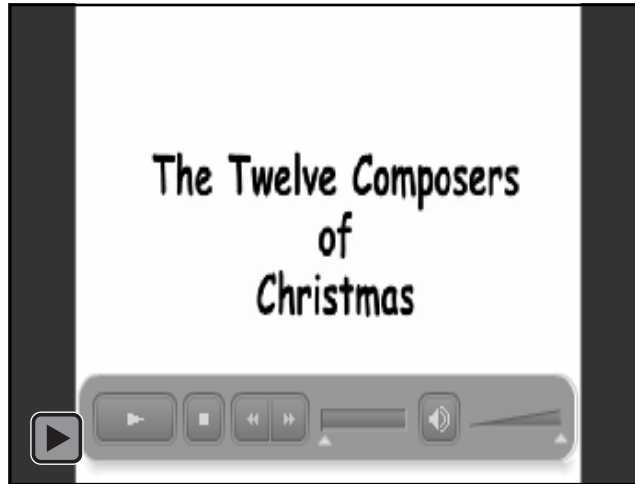
So, *Don Juan*, written in 1888, one of Strauss's earliest successes, a youthful work about a famous rake, ends on those "three thumps," - in E Minor - "and silence." It's an expectant silence to say the least because the music hardly seems resolved. In fact, the silence before the final thump is long enough to make us suspicious of the final silence. Tonight, before that silence had had a chance to be convincing, however, *Metamorphosen* had dawned with its opening chord on E Minor! This is one of Strauss's final works, from 1945, and it is very much the reflective work of an artist at life's end. Of this period, Ross writes, "The composer was musing in some deep way on the course of his life, perhaps questioning the philosophy of individualism that had long guided him." (337)

Two works that reveal their composer's extremes, and yet the one flows into the other as if it had been planned that way - as if *Don Juan* (and the youthful Strauss) had not really died, but rather entered into some sort of . . . well, metamorphosis. In fact, the sudden shift to a new harmony after the opening chord of *Metamorphosen* is arguably less jarring when preceded by *Don Juan*, because the E Minor has a context. I'm no Straussian, and I don't really know either work well, but I'll never be able to think of them separately again. Again, maybe the connection between these works has been remarked upon by others, though a quick, and admittedly unscientific Amazon search has yet to turn up an album on which the two works appear back to back. Curiously, I have managed to find references to a 1959 (?) book by Leo Weinstein called *The Metamorphoses of Don Juan*. However, that book doesn't seem to have anything to do with Strauss.

One little postscript. As anyone who follows this blog would know, I'm fascinated by **connections** that my **mind** makes from one musical work to another. The lingering trill in the low strings that happens about 18 seconds into the *Don Juan* clip above immediately reminded me of something else, and I couldn't think what, which of course is insanely frustrating - like seeing the slightly familiar face of some actor and not being able to place it. I spent about 30 minutes obsessed with that trill, playing it over and over in my mind to find the link. Frustration aside, it's a fun process and an amazing journey into how the mind and memory work - just a matter of trying to hear the Strauss trill and then letting memory search for what comes next. Finally, I started hearing an oboe finishing a phrase . . . and then . . . yes, one of the slow variations from Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Here's the Strauss and Rachmaninoff trills, **back to back**. Now I'll be able to sleep tonight.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2007

*The 12 Composers of Christmas (2.1)*

It was a Christmas miracle. You see, in the previously **posted version** of *The 12 Composers of Christmas*, I'd chosen to interpolate a recording of Don Giovanni singing the beginning of "**Là ci darem la mano**." However, in my arrangement, the tune quotation needs to begin a minor third higher than in Mozart's original; as it happens, I've been **playing around** with pitch-shifting on some recordings to make some mash-up medleys, so I figured it would be a breeze to get Bryn to start on C rather than A. Electronic Bryn was more than willing, but he emerged from the procedure sounding much more like a tenor than a baritone. You can compare the two here: **bariterfel - tenorterfel**.

And then the miracle - a fine baritone walked right into my studio yesterday, quite unexpectedly, and within minutes I'd captured him singing from C in true baritone timbre. He'd never even sung the duet before - from now on he'll find it a breeze, of course, in the easy key of A. By the way, the other odd thing about my quotation is that, though the intervals are exactly the same as in Mozart, they occur on different scale degrees, so the tonal context is a little off-kilter. (Basically, the tune should start on the first scale degree [*do*], but my context requires it to start on the fifth scale degree [*sol*].)

It only qualifies as a minor miracle because this very baritone was due to arrive for a coaching 24 hours later, but I still enjoyed the spontaneity of the impromptu recording session. So now, you'll no longer have to be vexed by the wrongness of a tenor singing Giovanni. (I'd still like Stickman Beethoven to get to the downbeat a little sooner. There could be a 2.2 in the future.)

[Works cited' list available **here**.]

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2007

## *The Best Christmas Party Music Ever*

At the end of my last [post](#), I suggested that the appeal of a family-produced, amateur movie is analogous to the appeal of playing chamber music at home. Just to be clear, I wasn't saying that my *Christmas Carol* movie is on the same artistic level as the Brahms and Dvorak quintets I'd played recently. The intended analogy would be:

DickensBook : MyDickensMovie :: BrahmsQuintet : PlayingBrahmsAtHome

Here's a little more background on the right side of that analogy. My psychiatrist wife, who just happens to be an excellent cellist, was recently invited by a fellow psychiatrist, who happens to be an excellent violist, to spend an evening playing string quartets with a cardiologist and an astrophysicist. (I know, sounds like the beginning of a joke. How about, "Note that all these highly intelligent people chose not to become professional musicians, not for lack of ability but...well, because they're all highly intelligent.") I was a little jealous...not that she was spending the evening with three gentlemen much smarter than I, but that she was getting to play chamber music for sheer pleasure.

However, a week ago we were both invited back and got to spend a delightful evening reading the Dvorak and Brahms piano quintets. These are difficult works and, naturally, not every note landed in the right place, but what a thrill to play them just for thrills - straight through each work (with repeats), with no fussing about how to interpret this *ritard* or that articulation. Not that such details are unimportant, but as fuss-worthy as this great music is, it's also intended to be played spontaneously. (As I should have said to the astrophysicist, "Hey, it's not rocket science." I'm sure he's never heard that one.)

If the evening accomplished nothing else, it reminded me that the Brahms quintet is one of the all-time great works, maybe even deserving of a place in the MM Top 10. At any rate, I've been listening to it over and over since that night. Of course, I'm glad I have recordings that were rehearsed and edited to be mistake-free, but my interaction with those recordings has a lot to do with having interacted with the actual notes, free of the pressures of performing for a formal audience. I had rehearsed and performed the Brahms years ago in grad school and even coached it with members of the Guarneri Quartet, but it was kind of nice that I didn't remember all the details. The slow movement, especially, has many sublime moments that I'd forgotten about until my fingers ran into them. How ever much I manage to broaden my musical horizons, I suspect this 19th-century chamber music rep will always be the most important to me as a musician.

Last night, the leader of these throwback salon sessions had a big Christmas party to which we, our three children, and the cello were all invited. It was a fantastic party all around, the kids all had a great time (and got presents!), and, after dinner had been served, the instruments came out. I figured there'd be some lighthearted carol-playing, but then I noticed someone pulling out a part for the Schubert C Major Quintet (string quartet + cello). These folks are serious: this is one of the longest, most profound of all chamber music creations - unquestionably part of the MM Top 10. I do play a little cello on the side, but in this event I was on baby-holding duty while my better half spent the better half of the party reading the entire thing - with repeats, of course. Yeah, I was a little jealous, and I had thoughts of jabbing my son in the side so that he'd wake up, need his Mommy, and let me take

over, but I'm sure Schubert's glad it worked out the way it did. (The other cellist was terrific, too - I'm guessing she's a neurosurgeon.)

Anyway, it was an unforgettable experience to hear this impromptu Schubert, surrounded by my three children, who all behaved (or slept) miraculously well. Yes, we had a few "are we there yet?" moments along the way (that "**heavenly length**" thing), but it was a blissful scene. Here's the best part: this morning, my 8-year old was spontaneously humming the so-beautiful-it-hurts 2nd theme from the 1st movement. She may have heard the music before, but definitely not lately; Schubert's heavenly length (and the exposition repeat, no doubt) did the trick. It's so satisfying to know that she was captivated by this theme, which is treated by Schubert in the most unforgettable way, maybe the most beautiful music ever - or so it seems today. In the end, there wasn't time for any carol-singing, but I'll definitely remember this "Christmas" music for a long time. True, I've still got Matthew Guerrieri's ***Bring Us In Good Ale*** stuck in my head, but if my children are humming the Schubert cello quintet, that's a great Christmas present.

MONDAY, JANUARY 28, 2008

## *An Old Viola Joke*

There are many potential topics to come from this past weekend's **opera scenes**, but I was particularly delighted by one little discovery, something I'd always overlooked. Our longest and most ambitious undertaking was the 30-minute opening scene of Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring*. I could go on and on about this opera, and intend to at some point, but I'll start with this small detail which others must have noticed and mentioned, but which has not shown up in my exhaustive scholarly Google search.

I've heard several times that many of the characters' names in this comedy about small-town life were taken from real-life characters known to Britten and Eric Crozier, the librettist. Well, at the very top of the show, Florence Pike, assistant to the imposing Lady Billows, is running about trying to keep up with a bizarre array of orders from her ladyship. Florence's first words are, "Doctor Jessup's midwife . . . mustn't touch legitimates; Advert in chemist's window, indecent - tear it up!; Call at Primrose Cottage . . . must stop William making such . . . rude noises or else!; Buy a breakfast cup." It only dawned on me last week that the rude William must be a reference to **William Primrose**, a Scottish violist who is probably the most famous performer on that instrument. He would have been at the peak of his career when *Herring* was written and, great artist that he was, it can't be a coincidence that he's accused of making rude noises - he was a violist!

I don't know how far back viola jokes go, but I think we can safely say this one from 1947 fits the bill.

[More *Albert Herring* discoveries in this **post** from the past.]

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2008

*the kind of infectious it's good to spread around*

The NY Times recently **invited** some of their classical music critics to "confess" their "secret musical passions" - to reveal some works/recordings they enjoy in spite of what one might expect of such highbrow types. Obviously, there's no right answer to such a question, but what I found most revealing is what some of the answers said about the moralistic tendencies of the classical music world - specifically, that there should such an obvious "right" and "wrong" way to perform various works. It's nothing new for me to suggest that ideas about "performance practice" are too prescriptive and idealistic - **Richard Taruskin** started beating that drum decades ago. And yet, here's Alan Koznin saying, "I would probably cringe to hear a young pianist play Scarlatti the way Horowitz did, but Horowitz's eccentric twisting and rebalancing of Scarlatti's ecosystem sounds just right when he's the one doing it."

What better indication is there that the academic side of the music business has gotten too much of an upper hand in how we listen, that one should be embarrassed to like something so likeable, and only willing to accept it because of the performer's fame? Is it any wonder that young performers are often criticized as being less original and spontaneous in their musicmaking than the giants of previous generations? Of course, the question of tastefulness in performance is one of infinitely recursive complexity; while I would argue for a much less moralistic tone about performance decisions and much more freedom than "the establishment" tends to allow, I also really value all the work that has gone into looking at performance practice in a scholarly way, and my own musical instincts are very strongly colored by "the establishment" way of thinking. In other words, I might want to say that performers should rely on intuition, but I might be horrified by what 1910 or 1810 intuition sounded like.

So, I haven't come to bury the "performance practice" movement, but rather to say that it's ridiculous that someone need apologize for enjoying politically incorrect musicmaking. (I understand, by the way, that Koznin's remarks are somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but they reflect a predominant way of thinking.) Here's a more practical way in which I experience this tension. Not infrequently, while listening to a student, I'll find myself thinking, "I should really tell him/her not to articulate/phrase/pedal/ritard, etc a certain way," not because it offends my musical sensibilities or makes the music unmusical, but because I know it's not the way one is "supposed" to play. Naturally, it's important when learning anything to have to work within a set of rules, but the further I get from being a student myself, the more I find myself wondering why we're so rigid about so much.

MM's Law, which I don't think I've ever revealed on MMmusing, states: "There's always a tradeoff." The tradeoff in our academically-grounded method of training musicians is that concerns about authenticity (doing what we think the composer wants) have tilted us too much towards this moralistic attitude about music-making, and away from a more intuitive sense of what sounds right. It's a very tricky balance; not every one has Horowitz's instincts, and a good musical training requires *some* rigidity in the early stages about what's musical, acceptable, etc. Still, I'm convinced the importance we put on "doing it right" by academic standards *can* be a significant impediment to communication with audiences, because it can distract us from the business of communication.

I'm not interested in going further down that thorny path today, but I was also a little disappointed that the focus of the "guilty pleasures" was still on classical music. First of all, that seems like a great way

to reinforce just how insulated we tend to be, to suggest, as Vivien Schweitzer did, that enjoying Klemperer's romanticized *St. Matthew Passion* is a kind of low-brow slumming. (How many potential classical fans have been turned off by hearing that a performance they thought they loved wasn't really any good at all because it violated some critic's sensibilities?) Secondly, I'd be much more interested to hear about the non-classical music that excites these critics.

Since my **Lenten discipline** demands that I forgo my normal sports radio on the daily commutes, I've been working the iPod more and, to be honest, sometimes struggling with what to listen to. I'm just not a pop/rock guy, but I'm often not in the right frame of mind to listen to typical classical fare either. With great joy, though, I did recently stumble back onto my favorite soundtrack of all time, the **music** for *A Mighty Wind*. Christopher Guest's masterpiece is one of my three all-time favorite movies, along with *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Magnolia*. A very personal list, to be sure, and not intended to suggest these are the best movies ever made, just the most important to me. With *Magnolia*, it's the symphonic scope of the film, the way in which three hours go soaring by and feel connected, despite a wide range of content. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is just perfectly executed from start to finish, both hilarious and heart-rending.

*A Mighty Wind* is the oddest choice here (a guilty pleasure, I suppose), but it's what went into making that extraordinarily delightful soundtrack that makes the movie special. These actors actually managed to create three convincing musical groups (The Folksmen, The New Main Street Singers, and Mitch & Mickey) that are equal parts hilariously satirical and legitimately entertaining, and the authenticity that comes from that gives the characters and situations unusual dimension for such a lighthearted film. I just watched the "concert" part of the movie again last night and I'm just amazed at what was accomplished. From the spot-on absurdity of the Main Street Singers' covering the Folksmen's "Never Did No Wand'r'in" to the exuberant final ensemble (in which the title song proves to be both a huge joke and completely genuine), it's the most realistic incorporation of musical performance into any movie I've ever seen.

By the way, it's pretty cool how that scene was put together. Not only did the three groups perform for a live audience, but the concert was both filmed and videotaped, so that the scenes in the production truck show true TV-like video on the monitors. (Ed Begley, Jr. kills me in those production truck scenes.) All the drama going on during the concert is believably coordinated with the concert in real-time; fortunately, the fantastic DVD extras let you watch the performances in their entirety, but getting to know the CD soundtrack (which includes yet more songs) is essential to really appreciating what went into this movie.

It's surely a sign of my own snobbery that I seem to need the satirical layer to let myself have so much fun to listening to folk music, but so be it. The point is that when I'm listening to "Never Did No Wand'r'in" (either version), "When You're Next to Me," or even "Potato's in the Paddy Wagon," it's hard to tell when I'm having fun because the parody is so good and when I'm just enjoying the very thing that's being parodied. That's a really difficult line for an artwork to straddle, but I feel no guilt in declaring this soundtrack one of my favorite guilty pleasures.

[The subject heading is taken from Jonathan Steinbloom's introduction of The New Main Street Singers, but it could just as easily apply to Horowitz's Scarlatti.]



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2008

## Warhorse Wordsmithing

MMmusing is still trying to get off the ground for 2008. I promise more soon, but I ended up spending way more time than expected this week writing program notes for an upcoming orchestra concert. I volunteered to do it because: I love writing program notes, I believe they can be very effective if done well, and I already knew the two works quite well. Somehow, though, it took forever to get these cranked out, and I'm still trying to tidy up the prose. As you can see below, I like program notes that function as a guide for listening, but it's always difficult to decide how much is too much, not to mention what vocabulary is too technical. For example, I chose not to use the term "trio" to describe the middle of the scherzo because I suspect a lot of our concertgoers might not know what that is, and it didn't seem worth the effort to unpack the confusing usage of that word historically.

By the way, I don't mean that as an insult toward our concertgoers, some of whom will certainly know the works well. Part of my philosophy here is that such listeners don't really need the program notes nearly as much, but I'll bet a good percentage of audience members at any symphony concert could use more help than most program notes provide. One of the ironies of the classical music world is that even the warhorses aren't really that widely known. Yes, the *New World Symphony* may be numbingly familiar to critics and the most seasoned aficionados, but what percentage of a typical audience really knows it well enough to find a live hearing too familiar?

Anyway, I'm supposed to be doing the grading that I didn't get done while I was writing these notes, so in lieu of a real post, here are my 2000 or so words about the Fauré *Requiem* and the *New World Symphony*. Yes, it's a rather odd pairing, although interesting to think that these works were composed around the same time. One thing I enjoyed about the project was remembering how much there is to love about the Dvorak. When I first sat down to listen to it, after not having thought much about it for years, my initial reaction was a little jaded, but it's really grown on me. Such confident music, and so many great tunes. I didn't need to be reminded of how much I love the Fauré, but I sure didn't mind listening to it again. (By the way, if you want to attend the concert, there's more info [here](#).)

---

*The history of Western music up through the sixteenth century is inextricably linked with settings of the Roman Catholic mass and other liturgies. Though interest in more humanistic genres such as opera and the symphony would slowly overtake the leading role of church music, even nineteenth century Romantics still found inspiration in these ancient texts, none more intensely than in the requiem - the mass for the dead. The subject of death, of course, is of great interest to humans; both composers and listeners have been drawn in by the inherent drama of death, judgment, and the promise of eternal rest. Two of the most famous requiems are from the operatic masters Mozart (1791) and Verdi (1873), each of whom forged searingly powerful blends of the personal and the eternal, with particularly vivid responses to the Day of Wrath. Other notable settings include an extravagant creation by Berlioz (1837); the German Requiem by Brahms (1869) in which the composer chose his own, more comforting selection of biblical texts; and Britten's pacifist War Requiem (1962), which incorporates modern poetry.*

*Though less grandiose than these titanic works, Gabriel Faure's Requiem is surely as beloved as any. Relatively humble in conception, part of its power lies in Fauré's conscious decision to emphasize*

*consolation and rest; the word “requiem,” after all, means “rest.” The composer reworked the standard text, eliminating almost all of the famous 57-line Dies irae (Day of Wrath) sequence, and inserting texts from other sources. The work has a somewhat complicated history, having been composed originally as a five-movement work for Fauré’s Paris church in 1889. The two movements with baritone solo were added later, and the original orchestration was filled out quite a bit in the version that first became well-known. However, the noted conductor and scholar John Rutter has convincingly argued that Fauré may have had little to do with this thickening of the orchestra, and Rutter’s 1983 reconstruction of the more transparent scoring that Fauré likely intended is what will be heard today. The orchestration is often little more than a subtle augmentation of the central organ accompaniment, but the unusual absence of violins leaves the top of the string section in the hands of divided violas and cellos, providing a distinctively warm aura.*

*The Requiem opens in an arresting manner, with unified voices pleading for rest in phrases that sound more speech-like than measured; the word “shine” (luceat) is given special emphasis. Though Fauré has a great gift for melody, the writing for chorus is often quite restrained, as if evoking the austerity of Gregorian chant. Soon, the orchestra takes up a richly flowing tune, over which the tenors sing a plaintive melody that is first fixed on a few pitches, but which eventually becomes more expansive. The movement builds to a climax imploring God to hear the prayers (exaudi orationem), and the tenor melody is recapitulated by unison choir in the traditional pleas for mercy (kyrie eleison).*

*The second movement begins in a more mystical manner, as shadowy visions of eternal torment are intoned by hushed counterpoint in the choir and quietly ominous interjections from the cellos and basses. The baritone soloist takes up the plea for protection of the departed in music that is restlessly optimistic. When the choir repeats the text from the opening of the movement, the counterpoint is both denser and more sustained than before, perhaps the most sophisticated writing for choir in the entire work, though still mostly subdued in tone. As is so often the case with Fauré, the mastery is in the subtlety of his craftsmanship. A radiant “Amen” suggests a hopeful transformation from the darkness that began this prayer.*

*The Sanctus is pure celestial radiance throughout, featuring a soaring solo violin and harp in the accompaniment. The use of violin is especially striking because of the reliance on the darker viola timbre elsewhere. As with the flowing orchestra tune that supports the tenors in the first movement, the accompanying violin line is more shapely than the simple phrases that are passed back and forth between the women and men of the chorus, as if the voices are transfixed by the heavenly vision. These unhurried melodic fragments range ever wider until a triumphant arrival at Hosanna in excelsis, from which the violin trails off into eternity.*

*Whereas the Sanctus ripples along continuously, the Pie Jesu is remarkable for its stillness. Though written in 4/4 time, Fauré subverts a strong sense of meter, floating exquisitely tender soprano phrases above the simplest of accompaniments. The orchestra echoes the soloist twice with a gentle rocking motion that gradually becomes a more regular part of the texture; the lullaby-like effect perfectly undergirds the soprano part as it rocks back and forth on two pitches, singing of eternal rest (sempiternam requiem).*

*The Agnus Dei begins with a sublimely rhapsodic melody in the violas. This becomes a countermelody to the arching tenor entrance that follows, as once again Fauré weaves an intricate instrumental idea around a less ornate vocal line. The full chorus responds more ominously, but the soaring tenor line*

returns. The previous movement is echoed as the tenors rock back and forth on *sempiternam requiem*, leading to a magical chord change on *lux aeterna* (light eternal); the whispered words that follow are bathed in the richest, most harmonically complex choral sonorities heard yet, as if something is gloriously illuminated from a great distance. A climax is reached and suddenly we are back at the starkness of the very beginning of the work, the lights having gone out. Again, the arresting plea for eternal rest is heard; consolation is offered as the rhapsodic viola melody concludes the movement.

There are many satisfying symmetries among the seven movements, including the placement of the intimate soprano solo in the center and the use of baritone solo in the second and sixth movements, which have the darkest texts. Whereas the second movement puts the baritone's music in the middle, the *Libera me* is framed by solo sections. This movement had actually been written years before, and it features the most melodramatic, least chant-like vocal writing. This is especially true of the baritone solo, which could come right out of an opera with its ringing references to fiery judgment. The chorus responds with appropriately mortified trembling, and the intrusion of tolling horns summons up violent visions of the Day of Wrath. Most melodramatically of all, the chorus then takes up the soloist's tune in grim, trembling unison.

Just as the dark second movement is followed by a radiant *Sanctus*, the sixth is followed by the even more ethereal *In Paradisum*. This is music of great delicacy that hardly needs description. The sopranos lead the way throughout, finding rest in the support of the chorus at cadences and an unending bed of arpeggios in the organ. In this year in which Gordon College has been investigating various perspectives on biblical shalom, Fauré's music provides a wonderful framework for thinking about the eternal promise of peace.

---

Antonin Dvorak actually wrote a very fine requiem of his own, but he's better known as a composer who can make instruments sing, whether writing for small ensembles or full orchestra. Works with a programmatic title always seem to have an advantage in the public eye, but Dvorak's ninth and final symphony, "From the New World," certainly deserves its popularity. Written in the same year (1893) that Fauré was adding the two movements to his *Requiem*, it is a celebration both of the "old world" ideal of a symphony in the mold of Beethoven and Brahms and of being open to new inspirations. It was written while on an extended stay in America, during which the composer spent a lot of time listening to and advocating for what he thought of as America's music, especially that of Native Americans and African Americans. He strongly believed that American composers should mine these resources, but it's open to speculation how much their influence can be heard in the *New World Symphony*. There are plenty of folk-like melodies, but that can be said of many of his works; Czechs have folk-songs too. If the work doesn't really sound like the more distinctive American music that sprouted in the twentieth century, there's something about its big-hearted gestures and wide-open spaces that connects with the optimism that a new world promises; just as importantly, the moments of melancholy may suggest a longing for the composer's homeland. In the final analysis, the main point is that the work surely reflects something of Dvorak's experience as a stranger in an exciting land.

The opening of the first movement is shrouded in mystery, beginning in the subterranean depths and echoing in the woodland heights; thus, the sense of a spacious canvas has been created even before the symphony proper has really gotten under way. After a series of violent outbursts, tentative woodwind figures are answered by the first occurrence of the symphony's primary motto - a rhythmic pattern of

*long-short-short-long with a syncopated stress on the last note. Finally, a drumroll and tremolando violins announce the arrival of the principal theme, introduced by the french horns. Constructed from a rising triadic pattern in the rhythm of the new world motto, the theme functions like an open-ended question. The working out of the movement is mostly concerned with explorations of this questioning idea, which draws forth a wide variety of responses from across the orchestral palette. There are quieter, chamber-like moments as well, including a gentle transformation of the motto into a sort of prairie tune, but a sense of unrest predominates and leads to a defiant close.*

*The second movement begins with a striking series of chords from the brass that magically transports us from the turbulent E minor of the first movement to the distant realm of D-flat major. (These chords will return at the end of this movement and, in blazing fashion, near the end of the last movement.) The modulation sets up the english horn to sing one of the most famous of all themes, beautifully tailored to the instrument's plaintive voice. The movement proceeds at a leisurely pace, though a more restless minor-key theme is introduced in the flute, music that could easily be interpreted as a longing for home. This is followed by an unexpectedly merry, dance-like tune in the oboe that suggests happy memories, memories that are soon interrupted by a dramatic reentrance of the new world motto - the outburst sets the stage for the return of the english horn theme. This time, the second half of the tune is taken up by a small group of muted strings - their hushed phrases trail off into several heart-stopping silences, but an even smaller group of soloists leads the way back home.*

*Whereas the major key of the second movement is tinged with persistent sadness, the minor key third movement is a spirited scherzo in ABA form, full of lively cross rhythms and playful echoes back and forth across the orchestra, with the timpani a featured player. One could say that the symphony as a whole gives lie to the notion that minor key music is always sad. Here, the vigorous main idea of the A section is countered by a more relaxed major key tune that anticipates the kind of cowboy song one might hear in a Western movie; the A section is rounded off with a return to the vigorous minor key music. Cellos and violas then recall the new world motto as a means of connecting to the good-natured B section, featuring yet another free-range cowboy tune. The A section is then repeated, though its ending is briefly interrupted by another dramatic reentry of the new world motto.*

*The final movement begins in startling fashion with unison strings biting away at the same half-step interval that would later be associated with a great white shark. This rush of excitement ushers in a heroic fanfare theme, first delivered by trumpets and horns. Dvorak's seemingly endless supply of catchy tunes and dance figures is put to good use in the kaleidoscopic finale, but the fanfare theme is never far away. As if this variety isn't enough, the heroic trumpet theme is converted into a viola ostinato over which the primary themes of the second and third movements are set dancing. Of course, the new world motto becomes part of this melting pot, and several great climaxes are achieved. One senses that the composer hates to say goodbye to such rich material, as apparent endings are extended several times; after quietly reminiscing on the middle movement themes one last time, the new world motto is combined with the heroic fanfare theme to set up a final race to the finish.*

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2008

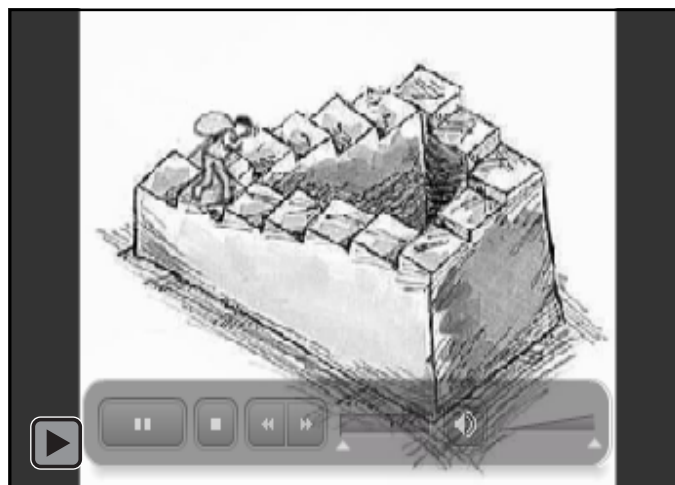
## Strange Loop

Strange how ideas evolve. I started a few [posts ago](#) with an interest in a similarity between sequential passages in Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. This led to an interest in sequences that can keep going endlessly, which made me think of [M. C. Escher](#) drawings and a Vivaldi concerto that I love to mangle. I found an online [cartoon](#) that humorously depicts someone stumbling down an Escher-type endless staircase, but my stumbling Vivaldi recording has the disadvantage (and advantage) that it ends. (Because it spirals downward, one runs out of pitches.)

This looped me back to thinking about how I'd extended the Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker* sequence by looping it, leading to the most recent [post](#) which provides an [mp3](#) that can loop seamlessly, seemingly forever. As an experiment, I listened to it continuously on my 45-minute commute home last night; mixed with snowfall at dusk, the melancholy minimalist music made for quite a companion; minimalist, but always going somewhere. As with most such experiments, much of the interest is in the effect on the listener. (Ultimately, that's true of all music!) I found my attention drifting in and out of the loopy soundtrack - one could say the "development section" of this "piece" was wherever my mind went.

One of my first thoughts: given that these 24 seconds are some of my favorites in the entire *Nutcracker* (not exactly one of my favorite works), what does it mean to jettison everything else and bask in the part I like? True, there's a lot to be said for letting context make the most of these moments, but I'm guessing just about everyone has had that experience of waiting for the good parts - (and sometimes the waiting is boring.) Whatever else one might say about the ridiculousness of listening this way, I was struck towards the end of the journey by the thought that I still found the passage beautiful. (That René Köhler sure knows how to summon gorgeous sound from his National-Philharmonic Symphony.) And it still sounded like it was going somewhere!

Anyway, this morning it occurred to me that I needed to find a way to combine the looping Tchaikovsky with the looping staircase, but, unlike the downward spiraling Vivaldi, the *Nutcracker* sequence reaches up - less than an hour later, I'd churned out this crude animation;



The subject heading comes from a concept developed by the great [Douglas Hostadter](#).

SUNDAY, MARCH 2, 2008

## *Canon Loop*

No, I promise, this won't be a Pachelbel marathon. Looping that canon would be way too easy, and it's so been done.

However, my **exploration** of **Strange Loops** and **Shepard Tones** led me to something really fascinating, and has resulted in the most interesting and satisfying of my loop creations. [see video below if you can't abide my prose.] In 1980, Douglas Hofstadter won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, **Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid**, which introduced the concept of strange loops as part of a dazzling exploration of meaning, self-reference, artificial intelligence, etc. It's been years since I read the book (although I'm a huge fan of Hofstadter's later work, **Le Ton beau de Marot**), so I had no memory of his suggestion that the "modulating canon" from Bach's **The Musical Offering** could be made to cycle endlessly by using Shepard tones. (He apparently did this with some 70's era synthesizers; I don't know how often it's been done by others.)

Here's the basic idea: this canon is an 8-bar structure which modulates up one whole-step each time through. Thus, when played six times, the performers have moved from C Minor to D Minor to E Minor to F# Minor to G# Minor to A#(Bb) Minor and back to C Minor, one octave above where the canon began. So, the music could go on infinitely, but it would soon become inaudibly high. (Before it became inaudible, it would probably be unbearably squeaky.) However, Hofstadter proposed that the Shepard tone technique could make it possible to modulate *up* to the same pitch where the music started. How? By slowly fading out one register while another fades in slowly from below.

Naturally, I couldn't resist trying this out - and there went my weekend! Not surprisingly, the Shepard principle works much better when the register fade take place over 2.5 minutes, as opposed to the brief scale snippets I **experimented** with earlier. Also, I think the dry, staccato attacks of my virtual guitars helps, because we're less likely to notice the subtle balance changes when the notes don't sustain. One surprise is that I'm quite pleased with the way the little computer guitars handle this "performance," and I think it's actually satisfying musically. For example, I much prefer their sound to **this**; not only is the counterpoint in my version clearer, it's also more pleasant to listen to. This is certainly Bach at his most Webernesque, so the impersonal interpretative point-of-view works.

The video below also incorporates a score - the resolution is borderline acceptable (I'm working on improving that), but I thought it was worthwhile to get all 8 measures on-screen at once. Along with my improvised "follow the magic yellow line" technology, it provides a really clear way to "see" the canon unfold. Each new page is essentially the same music, transposed up. I think the fade-down to the lower octave is pretty well camouflaged, although you can certainly pinpoint the switch if you listen for it. Still, it's remarkable to hear this music unfold this way, continuously modulating upward, but always ending back in the same place.

[see video on next page]





The top voice is based on the tune given to Bach by Frederick the Great. The other two parts are in canon, with the bottom voice leading and the middle voice following a measure behind and a fifth above. (A red arrow at the beginning of the video shows how the two relate.) The bottom voice (leader) is recorded on the left channel and the middle voice is recorded on the right channel [UPDATE: The stereo separation was lost in the YouTube transfer; the left/right distribution of parts does work on the download files below]. The modulation up is easy enough to hear each 8 measures, although it's worth noting that the top voice mostly traces a downward trajectory. This also helps to disguise the Shepard tone illusion.

Of course, the audio is what counts; I listened to it looping continuously on the 30-minute drive home from a recital tonight; that's some pretty stimulating wallpaper - it really clears the brain. You can download the mp3 [here](#) and try for yourself. Also, since I haven't gotten YouTube to make the video as clean as I'd like, you can download a higher quality .wmv version [here](#). It's about 33MB, but easier on the eyes.

If you want to hear my other recent experiments in looping, take a look at the last few posts. I'm still enjoying my [looped Tchaikovsky sequence](#) as an alternative to the Bach. Both are more appealing than most of what I can find on the radio, and I find the aural wallpaper idea quite interesting. Many classical radio stations trend that way anyway, but why not go all the way?

---

[Speaking of Hofstadter and the topic at hand, his latest book (2007) is called [I Am a Strange Loop](#). I haven't read it yet, but I think I know what he means. I don't know if he revisits the idea of applying Shepherd tones to this canon.]

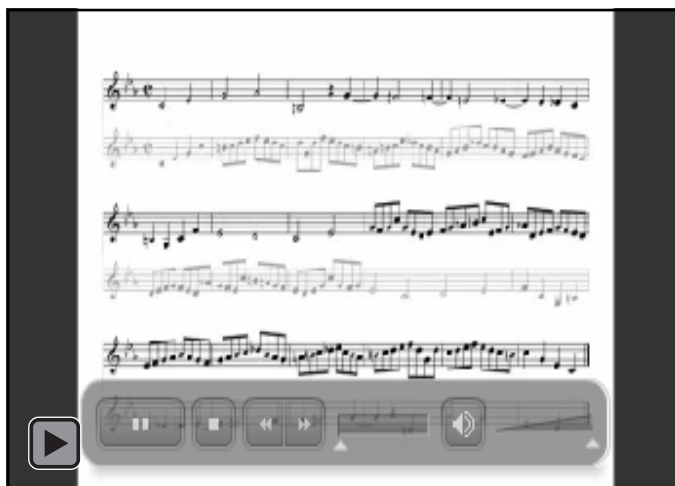
UPDATE: Just discovered something called Google (!) which lets you do web searches; this led to the discovery of other Shepard tone recordings of this canon, including [this one](#) on organ and [this one](#). I'm sure there are others, and there's much more information out there about Shepard tones. But there's no more time to search for now . . . [UPDATE2: but I did listen to that organ one, found on this [course site](#), and must admit that the illusion is exceptionally well-disguised. I think we're so used to hearing single voices playing multiple registers on an organ that the ear is more easily fooled by the subtle phasing in of a new register. I prefer the sound of my guitars, but concede that the the effect works better on the organ recording.]

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2008

## Retro Loop

As I hinted in the [previous post](#), seeing the *Princess Bride* DVD cover got my mind looping on loops again. I started thinking about Bach's crab canon from *The Musical Offering*, a 2-part canon in which the second part is the exact reverse of the first part. It occurred to me that if recorded with the right kind of synthesized timbre (specifically, one *without* a distinct attack at the beginning of each note), it should be possible simply to play the audio backwards and have it sound the same. The result is quite effective. [Here](#) you can hear the canon played forwards. Actually, I only had my synth record the top part; then, I reversed that audio and layered it on to the original. The top, forward-moving voice is on the left channel and the reversed version is on the right channel. If you'd like to hear what happens when the audio is played backwards, [here](#) you go. It's pretty much exactly the same except the voices have switched channels. (Sorry, no [hidden messages](#) from the beyond.)

As with my Shepard Tone [recording](#) of Bach's spiral canon, I thought a follow-the-bouncing-ball score would make a nice visual accompaniment. It's not really all that easy to perceive the canonic effect unless one has listened often, so it helps to watch the music go in both directions. This video plays through the canon twice, the second time reversed, although YouTube doesn't preserve the stereo effect. Although I chose to display the parts on two staves, what you should try to do is just follow the top staff from both directions. The lightly shaded bottom staff is just there to show what the backwards voice is doing.



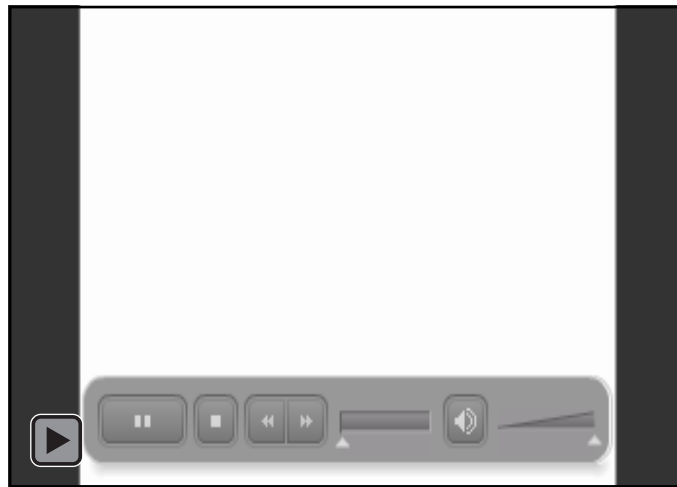
UPDATE: If you're wondering what a more conventional recording of this work might sound like backwards, you can hear it played forwards on the piano and then backmasked in this unusual little [palindrome movie](#). Obviously, the sharp piano attacks create an odd whooshy effect when reversed.



SUNDAY, APRIL 13, 2008

## *Ambigramania*

I first learned about **ambigrams** a couple of weeks ago when I saw the cover for the new **Princess Bride DVD**. This inspired me to think about Bach's crab canon, which led me to create **this little animation**. However, I also started thinking about creating my own ambigram; a couple of days ago, I came up with one. I wouldn't be at all surprised if someone's done this before (and much more elegantly), but I'm proud to have designed it myself. It's not as complex as many of the ones you'll find **here**, but it is one of the most legible I've seen.



In this video, you get to see the ambigram created from both ends at once so that it unfolds something like Bach's canon. The analogy isn't perfect because the canon tune is just heard against itself backwards - the ambigram involves a set of symbols that appear against themselves both backwards and upside down. What I like is the way that the symbols just "played" forward don't mean anything, but they create something interesting when ambigrammed. Well, I think it's interesting.

SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2008

## Carrousel perpétuel

I **mentioned** a couple of posts back that I had a project in mind involving Poulenc's *Trois mouvements perpétuels*. This is not that project - but having recorded the piece, I somehow ended up imagining and then producing the following. I think it's pretty cool.



Although I recently **wrote** about a fabulous music-as-rollercoaster **video**, putting Poulenc on the merry-go-around was not originally intended as another trip to the fairgrounds. This happens to be a wonderfully circular piece that is also conveniently brief, so my first thought was that all the notes could be wrapped around a big disc. You can see what that early version looks like **here**. I then thought about a variety of ways to make sense of this score-as-circumference, including depicting it as the edge of a spinning coin or LP. Then came the idea of putting a flag on top to help show how far around we'd gone, and soon it had become a carousel. Of course, the 3D animation (created with this **freeware**) is pretty crude. I'd love to have the Pixar techies on hand; as it stands, this is rather like a composer posting a MIDI recording when the London Philharmonic isn't available. It's the thought that counts. (The notes are a little clearer if you go **here** and choose the "watch in high quality" option.)

This also gives me an excuse to revisit the thrilling **RiesRollercoaster**. I was talking to a student recently who confessed that she sometimes prefers experiences in the jazz/pop world to classical because of the more natural invitation to express oneself physically - specifically, to dance. I mentioned the rollercoaster video to her - it exploits the same basic principle as those motion rides that use visuals to fool the body into thinking it's being whipped around. On some level, that's how we want audiences to respond to music - it's neither passive nor overly intellectual, but rather an intuitive interpretative response that makes us feel - well, whipped around.

And sometimes, after you've been whipped around on the rollercoaster, you just want to go for a nice relaxing merry-go-round ride. Actually, there's a famous French musical merry-go-around by Debussy that hardly sounds relaxing. (Lyrics **here**. Hear **here**.) Nevertheless, Poulenc's little bit of perpetual motion is closer in spirit to most carousels I've been around. And notice how the ups-and-downs of the ostinato L.H. can be heard as wooden horses gently bobbing up and down. If you think I didn't think about trying to animate that - well, you don't know me very well.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2008

### *Webern in Mayberry*

In our last **episode** (aka, earlier this afternoon), I posted a quick comparison of a short Webern piece (Op.6/3) with some soundtrack samples from *The Andy Griffith Show*. Then it occurred to me that it would be interesting to see/hear the Webern itself in the Mayberry context. I think anyone who's seen the show very often will concur that this fits right in.



This is from the AG episode, "High Noon" - if I'm not mistaken, the man who appears at the door is a mysterious Mr. Schoenberg...

MONDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2008

*Le sacre du Peterman***Pagan Roads, Take Me Home**

I took my seat at Symphony Hall, eager to be civilized by a blast from the cultural canon. Beethoven's 7th bounded by, buoyant and vigorous. The women hummed, the men sat up a little straighter.

Ears were puzzled by the cold splash of Carter's horn concerto, a hearty band of coughers joining in, but we all felt a little bit smarter for being there.



Then, with nary a downbeat, a strange sound issued forth. From a bassoon? No, from some distant past, a time that knew no history. I had come for civilization. Stravinsky had come to undo it.

Le sacre du printemps (No. 1913). Pounding rhythms, a sinuous alto flute, the primordial ooze of a bass clarinet. Other eerie sounds I dare not mention. Not for the faint of heart, but this trip is worth the sacrifice. Made from a blend of imported Russian and Parisian sensibilities. 100% virtuosic.



Available in CD, DVD, or classic LP.  
Full color (also available in piano version).

On the advice of my therapist, I'm not prepared to say yet why I ended up imagining my weekend trip to the **BSO** as a page from the J. Peterman **catalog**. But I did. [See also: **Peterman sells Schubert**.]

More Rite Stuff: **The Rose of Spring**, **The Rite of Springfield**, **The Rite of Springtone**, **Too good to be true**

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2008

*For that special masochist in your life...*

Another musical offering from J. Peterman:

**Mission Impossible**

Forearms tense. Fingers tremble. A deep breath, and our hero sets out. Bare octaves hurtle forth at unbearable speed, but going nowhere. Down below, an ominous motif winds up the scale and bounds back down. That's what they'll go home humming, but all his thought is bent on those insanely repeating triplets.



Somewhere, a voice is heard declaiming in German - something about a horse trying to outrace an evil spirit. It's a fine tale, but who's the real evil one here? How could a gentle soul like Schubert have done this to accompanists, those humble and unsung servants of art? Pain gives way to chilling numbness. Consciousness falters.



Yes, there's real human drama in Erlkönig (No. 0328). How will it end? Tendonitis? Carpal Tunnel Syndrome? Insanity? Probably, but sometimes, thanks to a steel will (and a little cheating), a final cadence sounds. Sure, a child is dead in his father's arms, but the miracle is that our pianist still has two arms. So, buy him a cold one, and pop the top for him - he'll be lucky if he can hold the can.




Available in High, Medium, and Low.  
Ships with arm brace and Vicodin® samples.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2008

## *The Rite of Appalachian Spring*

This is one of those projects where the title inspired the whole thing. We generally end up studying the Stravinsky and Copland around the same time in my music appreciation class, so it was perhaps inevitable that they'd run together in my mind at some point. I probably also owe some credit to Alex Ross, who does a good job of **pointing out** (see p.267 of hardback version) how much Copland's style owes to Stravinsky, even though the end results are quite different. This is also a good time to thank the ever generous Alex for **linking** to my "**Webern in Mayberry**" post, thereby sending a wee bit more traffic this way.



A few quick comments. I love this sort of project, as it fuses the acts of composing, arranging, and audio engineering. I've little doubt **Peter Schickele** would have gotten here first were it not for copyright issues, but I'd don't think he's married these pieces yet; in case you're wondering, this arrangement is performed by Maestro René Köhler leading the National-Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra. The musical part of this actually went together quite quickly. Nothing is transposed, in fact. And, yes, it is intended to sort of break apart at the end; that's part of the fun.

I only decided to add visuals to make this more YouTube friendly, so they're not very sophisticated. The *Rite of Spring* picture is Nikolai Roerich's **design** for the original 1913 production. You can see the Joffrey Ballet's recreation of that version **here**. It was completely unintentional that the generic *Appalachian Spring* image (which I just found on Google) ends up looking a little Thomas Kinkade-y at times. Ahhhh! By the time I realized that, I'd already invested too much time to go back. Please don't call me the "YouTuber of Light."

Christmas decorations go up on the blog tomorrow. (Or maybe **Saturday**. Tomorrow's really busy.)

FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2009

## Magical Music

I've tended to avoid assigning collaborative projects in my classes for one big reason: I always hated them as a student. In retrospect, this may reflect more on my own social anxiety than the idea of collaboration in general, although I did have some bad experiences. I particularly remember having to work with a group of total strangers to create and perform a mini-play for a truly horrible "theater lecture" class. I volunteered to write the play so as to avoid having to be on stage, but it was just a total fiasco.

However, one thing I really value about our music department is the sense of community among the students. Last year when my music history class got to early 18th century comic opera, particularly the popular and freely borrowing style of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, I got into a spontaneous discussion with the class about the possibility of replacing a paper-writing project with a group opera-writing project. We chickened out for a variety of reasons, but the idea stuck with me, and when I was planning for this year, I realized we had a class very well-suited to the task.

The group includes an ideal balance of voice majors: two sopranos, one mezzo, two tenors, one baritone. For an orchestra, we had two violins (including a piano major who happens to violin), a violist (actually a violin major, which of course is much better), one flute, two oboes, one clarinet, and another pianist to play continuo. OK, we also had a trombonist, which isn't standard fare for the Era, but she's a strong player who helped cover for the fact that I was stepping in as the cellist. (I played cello quite a bit up through college; since then, about once every 1.5 years.) With no double bass on hand, the trombone was a welcome addition to the bass line, and there's certainly a kind of authenticity in being resourceful this way.

I knew for sure that we had at least one aspiring composer in the group as well, but one thing I'm learning much too late in life is that composing isn't as specialized a talent as people tend to think. So, a significant purpose of this project was to let the students see what they could do; they've all had almost four semesters of theory now, after all. Again, *The Beggar's Opera* provides a good model here because the tunes are generally quite simple, four-square, and straightforwardly arranged; it's not like writing complex sixteenth-century counterpoint or grandly opulent Wagner. (In fact, I believe the specific impetus for last year's idea-hatching discussion was me saying, "I mean, even you guys could write something like this!")

However, I also hoped to use Pergolesi, Handel, A. Scarlatti et al as models for some Italian-style recitative (the English-style *ballad operas* just used spoken dialogue); the students had already experimented a bit with recit writing in an assignment from the previous quad. I wondered if creating recit-style vocal lines might be easier for some students than dealing in more structured harmonic contexts. (I'm not sure I'm right about this in retrospect; as it happens, the recits never made it to production, but I think I underestimated how difficult it is to master that style without having heard it for years and years. It requires a sophisticated feel for the rhythm of language.)

I knew that not every student would feel all that comfortable composing, and 15 chefs would certainly be way more than ideal anyway, so we began by having 4-5 students volunteer to create a libretto. I had originally envisioned that they would come up with some sort of contemporary college-life farce



(actually, I myself would like to take a stab at writing "Facebook: The Opera," which would feature only projected text - no singers!), but to my delight, they came up with a very charming fairy-tale like story, with characters inspired very much by our own cast of singers. In fact, the libretto team put together an entire plot that would have required at least a couple of hours worth of music, so we settled on the idea of just setting the *finale*.

We then had another 4-5 students assigned various compositional tasks. In fact, I'm still sorting out who exactly did what (ultimately, not that important to me, to be honest) since we had a very efficient student in charge of assigning tasks, keeping communication open, scheduling meetings, etc. (I knew the biggest mistake of all would've been to put me in charge of things.) Other students ended up being involved in helping with orchestrating, producing/printing parts, directing the stage action, chronicling the process, etc. To my happy surprise, a couple of students volunteered to write an overture, which borrowed themes both from the *finale* that was in process and from various hits of the 17th and 18th centuries.

All this was going on over the course of several weeks (of course, much of the work happened right at the end, as it has ever been among artists), and I chose not to use much class time on the project. I figured they were getting out of doing a paper (though they did still do some writing for the class), so they needed to expect to spend a lot of time that would otherwise have been spent researching and writing. This made the final week very exciting/terrifying for me, because I didn't really know what to expect. We ended up having our big rehearsal right after Friday's final exam. The idea was that if we thought we had something, we'd debut it at Sunday's end-of-year music dept. bash.

And it turned out we (actually, they) really did have something. In the end, we had the witty and tune-stealing overture, two beautifully characterized little arias (each with continuo only), two extended scenes of scene-stealing dialogue (authentic, after all, for the *The Beggar's Opera* context), and a fully orchestrated final chorus. The story concerns a mischievous witch who sells fruit that makes people fall in love, inevitably with the wrong people (including a poor minister, who gets chased around by a peasant girl), with everything being magically fixed in the end - and if you don't think we ended up calling it *The Magic Fruit*, well...

The rehearsal was predictably chaotic, given that everyone was pretty much seeing the parts for the first time, but the music was written simply enough that we managed to put it together fairly quickly. (I was very pleased that they took seriously my direction to keep it simple and not try to use every compositional trick in the book. Last quad's recitatives were a bit more "interesting.") There was a bit more coaching on Saturday and some very clever staging that went together at the proverbial last-minute, and suddenly we were performing the thing. It was a big success, with the audience laughing at all the right times and me managing to find most of the right pitches on my dusty cello. (I'd forgotten how much I love playing in an orchestra. It was also amusing as a cellist to find that Pachelbel's *Canon* had become sort of a ground bass for the overture and finale. I've certainly played *those* 8 notes a few times.)

So, what did we learn from all this? Well, probably the most consistent feedback I've gotten from the students has to do with how much they enjoyed the collaborative process (tossing ideas back and forth, etc.) and how surprised they were at what they could achieve. As a "learning objective," I would say a real benefit here is to demystify a bit the process of composition, and to remember that much of the music that has become "classical" was thrown together in a much more popular context and in a

perhaps similarly chaotic and collaborative sort of way. (I'm not saying that most operas actually had 4-5 composers, but the creative process was often driven as much by practical concerns as artistic principles. I'm also not forgetting that some music does deserve its awe-inspiring status. Notice I didn't ask for a Mozart-style *finale*.)

Several students also noted that it was fun to see how much fun musical borrowing can be. And speaking of fun, I make no apology for the fact that the success of our performance had a lot to do with silly stage action and inside jokes among the students and their audience of peers. Real theater doesn't apologize for what works - it just looks to make a connection with an audience. It's easy when listening to disconnected musical excerpts from a score anthology to forget that much of this music was written to entertain. There's no business like show business, but how often do we forget that music history is about show business?

In some ways, the most important aspect of this project is to remember that musicology need not just be reading/writing/research driven, although it can often seem that way. I already tend to do a lot of score analysis in my history classes, maybe more than the norm, but I often find myself resenting the idea that academic work is so often associated with writing and research. I have nothing against the development of those skills, but there are other kinds of intelligence that deserving nurturing as well; it's one thing to write about music, but perhaps just as useful to "write music" about music. Anything that encourages creativity is a good thing in my book.

Several students also commented on how gratifying it was to see how what they've been learning in theory and ear-training has paid off in being able to create something original and entertaining. That's a credit to other faculty members and to the willingness of the students to give this a chance. As I've suggested, I really didn't have much at all to do with the final product. (I do wish there had been time to workshop some of what we did, especially the recitative thing, but we did have to use class time to cover minor figures like Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart.) And, of course, the students found it very satisfying to have their compositions performed for an appreciative audience. (There is some bootleg footage floating around Facebook, but for now I'm going to leave what this all sounded like to the reader's imagination. Trust me, it sounded pretty entertaining.)

So, the biggest take-away point is that I've been an idiot for shying away from collaborative projects for all these years. It is difficult to give up control in this way, and the project could very plausibly have gone much worse, but it's good to make students sink or swim. I also need to learn better how to manage all the roles that are involved. As happens in any creative situation, sometimes a creative spark takes over, a job gets done suddenly and someone else gets left out. However, as I said above, in the end it's silly to worry too much about everyone getting exactly the same thing out of a project. Hopefully, the time invested is its own reward, and I don't think any of the students will ever forget *The Magic Fruit*. Many thanks to Andrew, Austin, Beth, Chris, Christine, Diana, Dina, Ian, Jillian, Joe, Cassandra, Katie, Mary, Nate, & Paul.



SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2009

### *Chopin's Funeral March (with ghosts!)*

Last night, while thinking about music I might use to frighten the trick-or-treaters, I **posted** on Twitter links to Horowitz playing the 3rd and 4th movements of Chopin's second piano sonata. The 3rd movement is perhaps the most famous funeral march ever written, but the ghostly 4th movement is even more harrowing - just frighteningly fast unison triplets played mostly at a deathly whisper, often **described** as "wind howling around the gravestones."

[3rd mvt](#)   [4th mvt](#)

So, naturally, I accidentally opened both videos at the same time and another mashup possibility was born. (You can easily experiment yourself by playing the above videos simultaneously.) I think this one works particularly well, hearing the funeral march in the foreground with the 4th mvt providing an eerie backdrop. I tweaked the tempi just a bit to make things end satisfactorily, so here you go. If you'd like to see the actual score, you can go **here** (pp.15-20), although the 4th movement notes aren't much easier to follow even when they're sitting still on the page.



Previous MMmashups: **Canon a 2 Tempi ~ Campanella Canon ~ The Rite of Appalachian Spring ~ Webern in Mayberry ~ Four Roses**

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2009

## *Name that Bassoon*

I continue to find iPod shuffling to be one of the more creatively engaging ways to listen. Not only is shuffling fun in a "name that tune" sense, but it can so often spark unexpected connections. As I've written many times before, I think that finding interesting connections is basically what creativity is all about, and inviting random input can be a remarkably effective way to find such links.

So, just yesterday I was driving home from work and the iPod shuffled to a track beginning with a lonely bassoon note, seemingly suspended in time. I assumed almost immediately that this was the beginning of the 2nd mvt of the Mendelssohn violin concerto, which famously begins with a lone bassoon B held over from the big finish of the 1st movement. And, though I don't have perfect pitch, it turns out that I was hearing a B in the correct register, and I'm sure that contributed to my sense that this was surely Mendelssohn - except, of course, it wasn't. Instead, it quickly became clear that this was Copland's *Appalachian Spring* - specifically, a reflective little connecting passage that precedes the famous "Simple Gifts" variations. I went back and listened several times, then cross-checked against Mendelssohn, not at all surprised to find it was the same pitch. Some pitch-moments are just loaded into the memory banks.

Not only do these two passages (from very different composers) begin with the same pitch on unaccompanied bassoon, but each then resolves up to a C. If you've been following this blog recently, you won't be surprised to know that I quickly thought of playing these two passages simultaneously, but I was quite surprised to find other little resonances. Most notably, Mendelssohn's C is followed by a G-sharp, while Copland's C is followed by an E-flat leading quickly to A-flat. Of course, G-sharp and A-flat are enharmonic equivalents - in piano terms, they are the same pitch! This is quite a coincidence, especially since neither is what would be expected in the respective contexts. Each passage is clearly in searching mode, but they start off searching in the same unusual direction.

From that point, the two excerpts head in different directions, with that Mendelssohn G-sharp creeping up to an A while Copland's A-flat holds steady. Still, there are some other nice little simultaneities - Copland arrives at a high G (melodic peak) where Mendelssohn arrives at a low G (lowest note) and when Mendelssohn's bass G resolves up to a C Major chord, Copland's melody lands on a C. By the end of this little mashup, we have Mendelssohn C Major nestling against Copland A-flat Major, two chords which share only that first C. The other pitches in those two chords clash wonderfully, and create a lovely bitonal sonority. Actually, the Copland passage (which is exactly like the opening of *Appalachian Spring*, except a half-step lower) already has some bitonal sonorities, with A-flat and E-flat chords coexisting in mm. 3-6 below. Thus, the clash with the Mendelssohn just seems like a logical extension of the sound world that's already in play.

Most amazingly, when I put the two audio files together, it turns out that almost all the barlines align pretty closely, even though Mendelssohn is in 6/8 and Copland is in 4/4. Obviously, I got lucky with the recordings I happened to choose - there's no guarantee this would always happen, but I'm fascinated by how many connections can be heard and seen in this randomly discovered pairing. I find the result quite beautiful in its own way. Here's a reasonably accurate depiction of how the two scores line up (Mendelssohn on top):



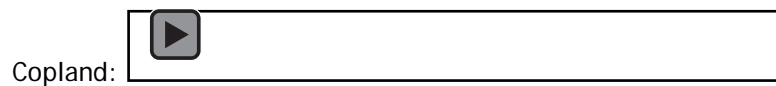
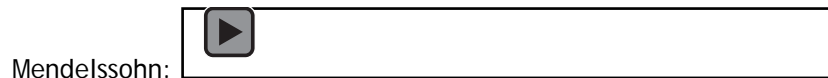
[click to enlarge]

Here they are again, with annotations:

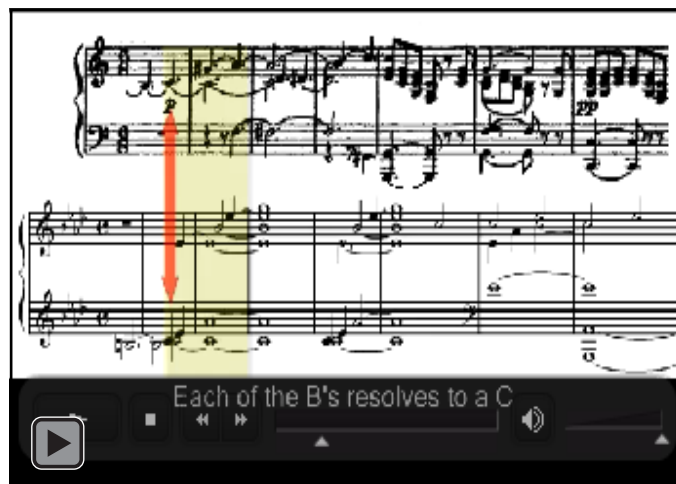


[click to enlarge]

So, I don't really know what this all means, but it was fun to explore. Here's the original audio:



And here's what they sound like together:



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2009

## *Illuminating Ornamentation*

I mentioned about a month ago that I recently collaborated with artist Jim Zingarelli as part of an exhibit called "Drawing as Encounter." Again, just to be clear, he did all the drawing/painting/etc. I was just an encounteree, although that did produce some musical performances from me that have become part of the exhibit. The process of talking with Jim about the different ways we think as artists - he as free-thinking creator in visual media, I mostly as a recreator of existing musical scores - brought us back several times to thinking about the phenomenon of the musical score, both as visual object and as a somewhat vexing authority figure.

Musicians, of course, tend to refer to the score as "the music" even though, as I cleverly demonstrated at the exhibit opening by holding *The Well-Tempered Clavier* up to a microphone, the score doesn't produce any actual music. The process of interpreting those little black specks is an art in itself (I like to think), but one fraught with all sorts of tension about being true to the composer's wishes, etc.

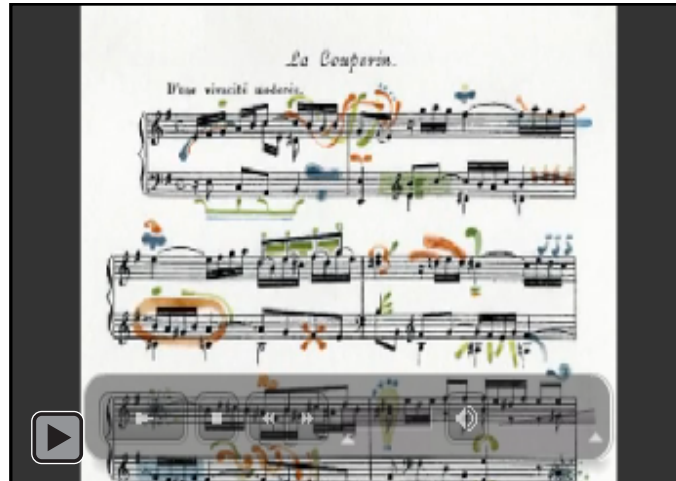
Jim had the idea of emancipating the score, in a way, by treating it as a sort of canvas to which he could add his own decorations. We talked about various possibilities, including some music of Poulenc, whose musical spirit reminds me of Z's work. Jim showed me a little impromptu watercolor sketch he'd made that was inspired by listening to some Poulenc I'd suggested. The delicate figurative intricacy of the sketch somehow brought to mind the kind of florid ornamentation one sees and hears in the French Baroque style. It occurred to me that the music of François Couperin, whose scores are readily available in public domain form, might make an interesting canvas for our experiments since the music lends itself to liberal ornamentation from the performer.

The first score I gave him is a beautiful little piece charmingly self-titled "Le Couperin." I chose it partly because it can be played slowly enough that florid elaborations are possible; I actually removed all of Couperin's indicated ornaments and then basically instructed Jim to do whatever he wanted to with the rest. His intent was not to try to think like a musician, but rather to respond to the score as a visual object. My job, then, was to perform it, finding whatever suggestion and inspiration I chose to from Jim's encounter with Couperin.

I don't mind admitting that I'm no expert when it comes to Baroque improvisation - or when it comes to any kind of improvisation, for that matter. In fact, this is part of what I hoped to gain from the experience - the enigmatically ornamented score presented itself less as an academic challenge in following instructions than as inspiration to be freely creative. Although I did settle on some consistent ways of interpreting some of the colorful markings, I gave myself permission not to be too constrained by them. Still, one of the outcomes of the experiment was finding that the new score was not just liberating - I also learned that certain ideas (end of m.4, for example) worked so naturally that they became, in my mind, settled ways of reading some of the markings.

But, I'm not going to try to explain or defend any of my choices here. There are still some passages that I'd like to explore more, but I won't say which ones. Here then, complete with the Couperin/Zingarelli score, is one possible interpretation:





Note that there are ways in which this sort of visually inspired interpretative process is related to some of shuffling experiments I've blogged about recently. Although Jim's score markings (or "illuminations," as I like to call them, thinking of medieval manuscripts and the like) aren't exactly random, the way in which they interact with the notes is at best tangentially related to the kinds of instructions that notes are supposed to convey. So, just as shuffling an iPod can lead to unexpected connections and discoveries, using an artist as intermediary can provide a fresh way of looking at an old score.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2009

### *Testing with the Stars*

A few years back, for reasons forgotten and perhaps better unknown, I started inserting pictures of famous music types into the final exam margins for the two quads (Baroque & Classical) of music history I teach. The tradition began with some of the amusingly coiffed heroes of the Baroque, in pictures lifted from the pages of Norton's *A History of Western Music*. A year later, these history stars began spouting mostly comforting advice to the inevitably nervous test-takers. Then, last year's Classical Era exam featured some stunningly bad puns from that well-known cast of characters. [NOTE: Bach and Handel actually kick off this quad in my arrangement.]

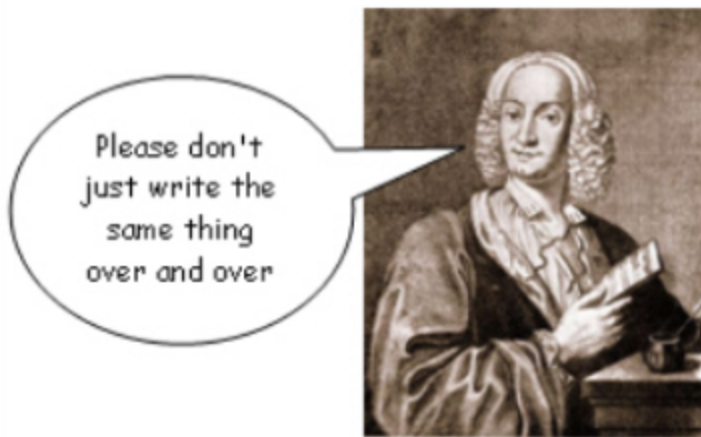
Remarkably, one of the students who'd endured all of that last Spring wrote the following on my Facebook wall today: " I think I'm going to miss having cartoons on my exams this semester." In retrospect, he may have done this knowing that I couldn't resist the temptation to conjure up a few words of wisdom from the finest the 20th century has to offer. (I don't teach that class, alas.) I happened to be home "watching" the kids, so it was pretty much inevitable that this student (let's call him "Joe") would end up with a little gallery of composerly advice on his Facebook wall. I figured I might as well get a blog post out of all this as well.

Here's the first batch of Baroque sages who, I believe, debuted in March of 2007:





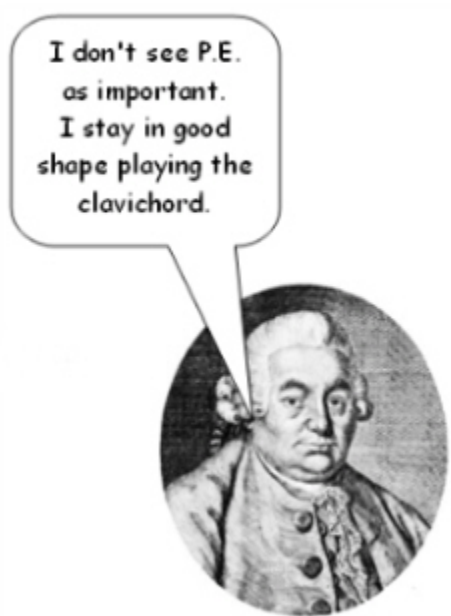
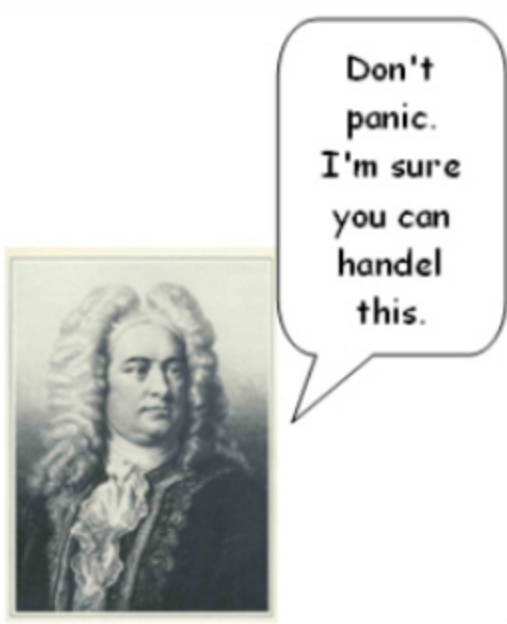






Then, last Spring's "Classical Era" exam featured these highly unoriginal, cringe-inducing puns:



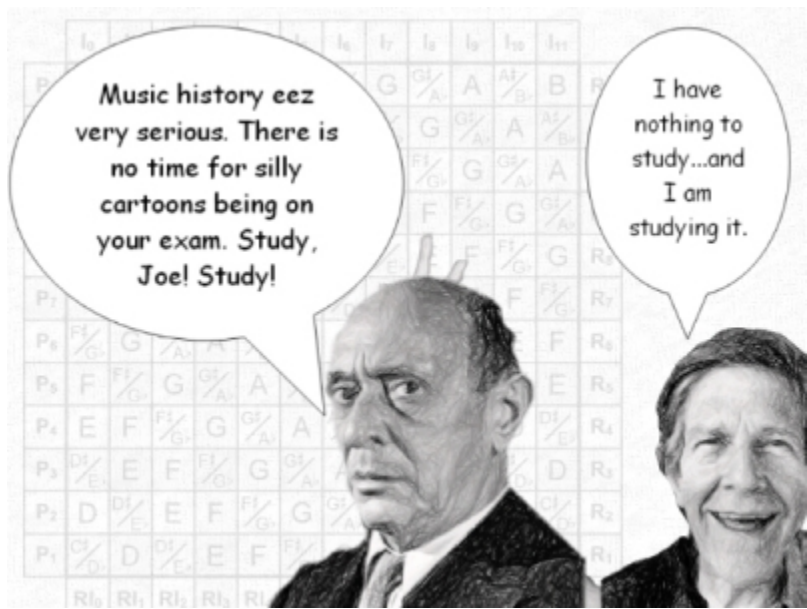


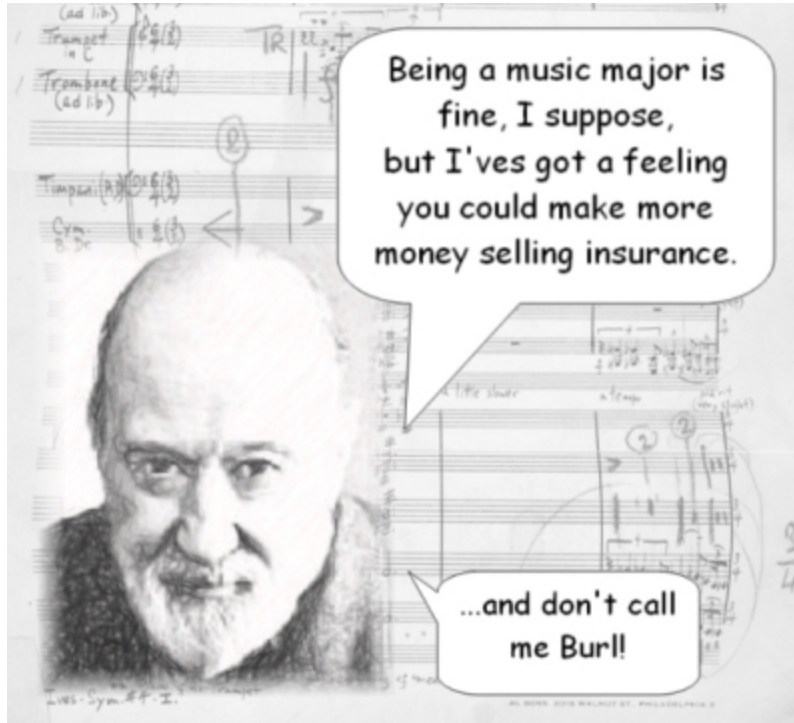






If, by some miracle, you haven't fled this post in pain, here are my little 20th-century additions to the genre, created on this very afternoon:





Why'd the composer  
cross out what  
the road? he wrote?



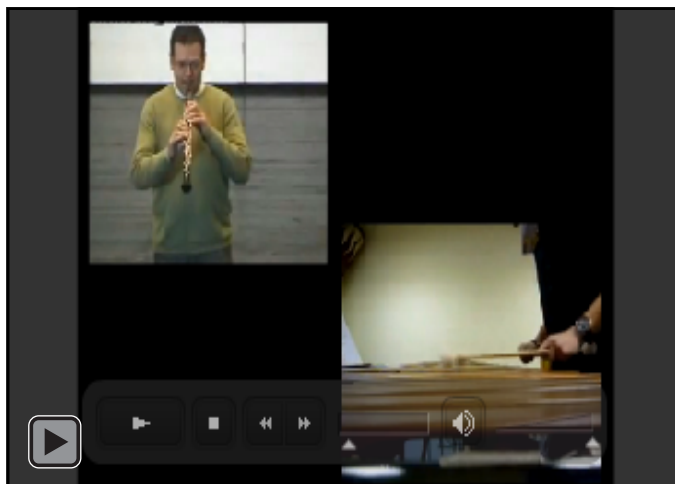


NOTE: You can reveal the identity of all of the above by clicking on the images - well, except the first 20th-century image has two composers, the second of whom is **this guy**. The horrible Haydn thing is, of course, a reference to my **oft-confessed** lack of affinity for Papa Joe.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2010

## *Reflections on a 2-part Invention*

[The video below was already embedded in the previous post, but annotations have now been added as well.]



So what can we learn from this little **experiment** (see past **two posts**) in which two musical works virtually drawn from a hat turn out to sound pretty cool played simultaneously? One of the strangest things about this discovery is that I feel I've come across something remarkable for which I'd like to take a lot of credit - and yet, one of the things that makes it remarkable is that I didn't work very hard or exercise much creativity to make it happen. I had this idea of combining two student performances, there were nine performers to choose from, we only had one piano available so it made sense to go with the only two students performing without piano, and that's pretty much how I settled on these two pieces I hardly knew - that these two pieces happened to complement each other harmonically, rhythmically, and structurally was sheer good fortune. Maybe even more amazingly, the two YouTube performances I first chose just to provide some reference turned out to match up even better than the live mash-up. It was certainly not the only or most likely way this could have played out.

Still, I'm going to say that **Lesson #1** is that it's not so unlikely that a random pairing will produce lots of satisfying connections. I've written about this many times before in various contexts. In ***The Power of Random***, I mused about how a CD track that had been running through my head (though I hadn't paid much attention to it) inspired a strange little music/poetry/video response to the Red Sox trading away Manny Ramirez. In ***Hyperspace***, I wrote more broadly about how the creative process is often just a matter of making connections among ideas that come before us. It is simply human to try to make sense of what we perceive, even if sensible connections weren't intended. (It's hard to imagine what composers Benjamin Britten and Mitchell Peters would think about the fact that I've turned their finely crafted works, each intended to be heard in an otherwise silent context, into something which is both brand-new and which also preserves exactly what they wrote.)

Still, I did get lucky this time. The first time I ever posted about this "random simultaneous listening" idea was in this 2007 [post](#), where one can hear performances of Mozart and Handel fighting to the bitter end. (mp3 [here](#).) The clashes in that audio file are particularly and consistently intense because the two performances inhabit different tuning worlds - microtones abound; and, of course, Mozart and Handel each write in musical languages that are more rule-bound and restrictive, both in terms of harmony and rhythm, than in the Britten and Peters works. The more ordered the originals, the more disordered a mashup is likely to sound. I still like listening to that Mozart-Handel recording because it poses a fun challenge for the ears, both to pick out the different strands and perceive their separate logics, and to savor the odd blend. I was honestly intending something more in that vein for Monday's class, but only because it hadn't occurred to me that we'd stumble on such a match. Fortunately, there are more classes in the future to push the envelope a bit more.

And that's **Lesson #2** from this experiment: that the brain can really enjoy this kind of challenge. Maybe it's just me, but whereas I sometimes struggle settling my ears into the world of pervasively dissonant music, I find much less of a barrier when I know the dissonant strands make sense on their own. I feel certain that the attention/interest level in the room went up quite a bit when we switched from the standard fare of students performing one after the other to this little bit of mind-bending simultaneity. Yes, the novelty factor plays a big role, but minds like to be challenged this way; certainly that's one of the reasons counterpoint is appealing, even if it's generally more rule-bound than our Britten-Peters 2-part Invention. Whereas traditional counterpoint has rules designed to regulate the use of dissonance and promote independence among the lines, here the listener may draw some comfort from the regulation that each piece is completely self-sufficient.

**Lesson #3** is that layering works like this can reveal some of the common ways in which musical works are constructed. It's not entirely coincidental that the oboe and marimba reach several structural milestones at more or less the same time, since each of these works follows a very familiar pattern of exposition, development, and recapitulation. The Peters work is a bit longer, mainly because it has introductory and closing sections, but its central formal structure is pretty close to Britten's. Each has an opening section that ends right around 1:10, with a temporary relaxation that follows; each reaches a climax of instability/tension around 1:50, with relatively fast-paced descending patterns that lead into recaps. One of the features I've always liked about my [Vertical Christmas Medley](#) (seven metrically aligned carols played at once) is that, because the musical phrases are all tightly lined up, one hears in the undulations the natural tendency for phrases to start and end with longer notes, with busier rhythms in the middle. The Britten-Peters duet shows something similar about large-scale structure.

**Lesson #4** is that there's something really nice and freeing about not being so focused on the technical execution by the performers. Although both of our student performers surely felt a bit awkward and self-conscious about this unusual challenge, I assured them that an advantage would be that any mistakes would be both less obvious and, more importantly, less important. Classical musicians too rarely get to experience this sense that "maybe every note doesn't matter so much." It would be nice if we could learn to perform and listen with this mindset all the time!

Following from that, **Lesson #5** is that this kind of exercise is a great way to experiment not just with a special kind of concentration (kind of like how Glenn Gould [reportedly](#) practiced "in the company of radios, TVs, and vacuum cleaners, every instrument switched on while he perfects the accents of a

piece"), but also with all sorts of possibilities for improvisation in the moment. As I mentioned in my first post about this, our oboist did a wonderful job of timing her entrances to the rhythm and pacing of our marimbist. I hadn't really anticipated that, since part of the point in this exercise is to stick to your guns, but it was great to see how the intersection of these two pieces inspired that kind of thinking.

Anyway, we'll definitely be trying this again. For now, if you've wondered about adding more layers, you can sample this chaotic little amalgam of music history quiz excerpts that I wrote briefly about in this 2008 [post](#); listening to it again just now, one of the things I like about it is how the two completely different Monteverdi excerpts outlast all the others (not by design, just by happy chance). First to emerge are the fading, frenetic *stile concitato* strains from *Il combattimento* and, most elegantly, the last thing ones hears is Orfeo lamenting amidst the madness, "ed io sospiro" (and yet I breathe). In the opera *Orfeo*, he sings those words in devastated response to the news of his beloved Euridice's death - but it works well as a response to surviving the vertical music history medley.

TUESDAY, MARCH 2, 2010

### ...in which Winnie the Pooh inspires Twitter-like program notes

I've written a lot [recently](#) about how much I love bringing relatively random artistic elements together, but it's not always [Reese's Peanut Butter Cups](#). Sometimes, a bunch of stuff tossed together sounds like...a bunch of stuff tossed together. So it is that I've grown restless with our school's regular "General Recital" format in which a bunch of students perform whatever they happen to be working on and we slap it all together into a recital.

This year, I've taken on the job of trying to order the various elements into something balanced and cohesive, but since the recitals inevitably run longish (typically 20+ performances by pianists, strings, winds, singers, whatever), one can still sometimes sense the audience becoming catatonic. This isn't intended as a commentary on our students' performance abilities - it's just an unnatural thing we're trying to do, especially since we're not providing much context for our listeners (often parents who don't necessarily know their way around the repertoire). Context can be especially crucial for vocal pieces in foreign languages, but lots of instrumental pieces make more sense to those in the know as well.

It might be good training for our students to have them give little spoken intros, but that would only lengthen the program and possibly incite riots. Alternatively, who wants to turn back and forth 20+ times to pages of program notes? Not to mention, who wants to write program notes for 20+ separate pieces? Well, it turns out that I decided I wanted to do that, but not in the traditional way. Rather, mainly because I had a few hours to kill before attending a different concert, I decided to write up micro-program notes that could be incorporated right into the program. Finally, something for which my [Twitter](#) experience might pay off! Here's a sample of what they came out looking like (with names changed to protect the innocent):

## A SOPHOMORE GENERAL RECITAL

Sunday, February 28, 6:00 PM

Sinfonia No. 1 in C Major ..... Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685-1750)

...in which Mr. Bach shows how elegantly he can weave three voices together with only two hands

Scottie Pippin, piano

Partita No. 2 in D minor ..... Johann Sebastian Bach  
I. Allemanda (1685-1750)

...in which Mr. Bach shows how a single violin can provide melody & harmony in a curiously serious and flowing dance

Peyton Manning, violin

Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1 ..... Frédéric Chopin  
(1810-1849)

...in which a particularly sad, lonely tune is richly treated, leading to a grand climax and a passionate return

(and, as a side note, Chopin's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday is tomorrow!)

Rachael Ray, piano

Gretchen am Spinnrade ..... Franz Schubert  
(1797-1828)

...in which the piano imitates Gretchen's spinning wheel while she passionately but anxiously thinks of Faust and his kisses

Katie Couric, soprano  
Dick Cheney, piano

Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 22 ..... Henryk Wieniawski  
I. Allegro moderato (1835-1880)

...in which the great Polish virtuoso Wieniawski unhurriedly merges passionate Romanticism with every violin trick in the book

Clint Eastwood, violin  
Noam Chomsky, piano

First of all, it was a fun challenge to write these notes. I knew about 75% of the pieces very well, and a little YouTube/iTunes surfing made it easy to get caught up on the essentials of the others, but the



task of summarizing even a 3-minute song in one line is a good exercise in thinking about what we want an audience to hear. Especially for a program in which the performers and styles are changing so quickly (the pieces probably average about 5 minutes in length), the goal I had in mind is that the reader be able to, in one glance, see the title, composer, performer(s), AND get a quick sense of what's about to happen. The brevity of the descriptions also makes it much more likely that they will be read, without making the reader feel overly put upon.

The decision to use the "...in which" construction was not consciously made - it just kind of happened, as did the storybook-like references to "Mr. Bach." It was only later that one of my colleagues pointed out to me the "**Pooh-bear**"-ness of this approach. I think I thought I was borrowing more from **E. M. Forster** or **Henry Fielding**. A click through to the Forster link reveals chapter titles *in* that spirit, but the Fielding link definitively confirms that the Hundred Acre Wood isn't the first or only place in which "in which" plays a big role. (Wow, this is quite a rabbit-hole I didn't expect to explore on this blog. In fact, I'm in over my head in this sort of literary history since I don't read nearly enough, so I'll let you trace the history of "in which" as chapter heading on your own from this point.)

Anyway, the truth is that the Winnie the Pooh spirit was certainly in the air as I spun out these words, and I'm pleased about that because 1) it has a whimsical quality that reminds us we needn't take ourselves too seriously as musicians, and 2) it invites us to view a recital like this as a series of little chapters or stories. By the way, the same colleague who pointed out the Pooh connection also suggested that our next program should use **Friends**-style titles, as in: "The One with the Inverted Fugue Subject" or "The One where Rodolfo Sings a High C" or "The **One** where the Pianist's Arm Falls off" or "The One where Hindemith wrote a Sonata for \_\_\_\_\_ that Pianists Hate but that gets played a lot because there aren't so many Sonatas for \_\_\_\_\_" - whoops, getting lost down another rabbit-hole here...

So, in summary, I think this was a big success with our audience and it reinforces something I've thought for some time - that programs need to be much more elegantly and efficiently designed. For example, although I understand that the BSO's program booklets exist largely to bring in advertising money from retirement communities, I hate trying to navigate my way through to find the program notes (which are always carelessly sprawled across several pages), bios, and the lists of orchestra members. I'm not saying there's never a place for lengthy, in-depth notes (although I'm not always convinced that place is at a concert), but I really like the idea of programs where the notes are integrated right into the program listing.

Here, for example, is the way I printed our Opera Scenes program for last Spring (blogged **here**). The **operaplot**-inspired rhyming synopses aside, this layout allows the audience member to see, in one glance, the entire program; it also means that, whether one is curious about who's singing what role or about what's going on, the important information is always right there - no messy page-turns required. And you should all know that I **HATE** page-turns.

**The Old Maid and the Thief, Scene 1**  
(10 minutes)

Gian Carlo Menotti  
(1911-2007)

Miss Todd..... Student Name  
Miss Pinkerton..... Student Name  
Laetitia (Miss Todd's servant)..... Student Name  
Bob..... Student Name

Miss Todd and Miss Pinkerton talk over tea;  
Each is sad to be old and still absent a he.  
Laetitia comes in to announce there's a visitor.  
Miss Todd and Laetitia are thrilled it's a Mister.

**Dr. Miracle, The Omelette Quartet**  
(10 minutes)

Georges Bizet  
(1838-1875)

Laurette..... Student Name  
Véronique..... Student Name  
Pasquin..... Student Name  
The Mayor of Padua..... Student Name

A resourceful young man makes an omelette as part  
of an opera-like plan to secure his sweetheart  
Later on in the plot, to her parents' surprise,  
it's revealed that this chef thing was just a disguise.

**Susannah, Act II: Scenes 1-2**  
(20 minutes)

Carlisle Floyd  
(b.1926)

Susannah..... Student Name  
Sam (Susannah's brother)..... Student Name  
Rev. Olin Blitch..... Student Name

An innocent bath seen by Elders has meant  
that Susannah's been shunned, told she has to repent.  
Sam consoles her, but leaves. Later, at the revival,  
she's preached at by Blitch when he notes her arrival.

INTERMISSION

**Hansel and Gretel, Act II: Scenes 1-2**  
(12 minutes)

Engelbert Humperdinck  
(1854-1921)

Gretel..... Student Name  
Hansel..... Student Name  
Sandman..... Student Name

Gretel sings to a mushroom while Hansel picks berries,  
but the coming of night makes them slowly aware  
that they're lost in the woods. Enter Sandman, who ferries  
them off to their dreams, though they first say a prayer.

**Dido and Aeneas, Act II: Scene 2 – Act III**  
(20 minutes)

Henry Purcell  
(1659-1695)

Dido..... Student Name  
Aeneas..... Student Name  
Belinda (Dido's sister)..... Student Name  
Attendant..... Student Name  
Sorceress..... Student Name  
Spirit..... Student Name  
Witches..... Student Name, Student Name  
First Sailor..... Student Name

Aeneas and Dido are all set to marry,  
attendants are singing when storm clouds are spied;  
as all haste away, an imposterous fairy  
gives Aeneas false news that he must leave his bride.

While sailors prepare, witches plot their destruction,  
which delights them no end, having also foreseen  
that the mistreated Dido will end the production  
by lamenting and dying, a heartbroken queen.

**The Tender Land, Act I: Finale**  
(12 minutes)

Aaron Copland  
(1900-1990)

Laurie..... Student Name  
Ma..... Student Name  
Martin..... Student Name  
Top..... Student Name  
Grandpa..... Student Name

Two drifters, out looking for work, are quite glad  
when they come 'cross a girl, a wide-eyed high school grad.  
Though Grandpa and Ma both express some misgiving,  
soon they all join in singing "The Promise of Living."

More about unwieldy BSO program booklets and unwieldy recital experiences in posts yet to come...

TUESDAY, APRIL 13, 2010

### *Why Twitter exists...*

I'm beginning to fear that this will one day be known as the Spring That Ate My Blog - so much insanity, so little time, so many posts that haven't seen the light of day. Anyway, I do still **Twitter** every now and then, and nothing's more fun on Twitter than a good, ridiculous meme. Today, **someone** started tweeting "composerfilm" titles in the vein of "Bach to the Future" and "**Schindler's Liszt**." To say that I am defenseless in the face of such a challenge would be a great understatement. Titles started flying out of my TweetDeck faster than I could think to stop them. Some of my own that I particularly like include:

A Room With a Vieuxtemps

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Rorem

Batman and Scriabin

Amazing Grace and Gluck

The Good, the Bad, and the Lully

Bob and Carol and Ted and Tallis

Barefoot in Duparc

Saturday Night Biber

Crocodile D'Indy

But that's not all. There was: Up in Glière, Honegger to Remember, Sibelius Saint Mary's, Dances with Wolf, The Two Joan Towers - even Hot Tub Time Messiaen. Yes, it's been a productive day in the mind of MMmusing.

Some other favorites that I can't claim credit for:

**Czerny to the Center of the Earth**

**Gubaidulina, Mr. Chips**

**Ravel Without a Cause**

**A Streetcar Named De Falla**

**When Hindemith Sally**

**Xenakis on a Plane**

**A Ligeti of Their Own**

**Bridge on the River Cui**

**Three Men and a Babbitt**

I think a meme like this may have gone around before, but this one definitely caught fire. You can see hundreds of submissions by going **here** and then continuing to click through to the "older" posts at the bottom.

I've started a meme or two myself, though none of mine has really caught fire - not even #violaopera. But, you can find some classic #violaopera titles, and even crazier items such as #violapalindrome by visiting this [archive](#) of my first 2000 Twitter posts. Just go there and search the page for the terms above - just searching viola can be fun as well. (I'm up over 2200 Twitter posts now, but haven't archived them all yet.)

Blog posts will come...

[UPDATE: Other fun memes to search in the [archive](#) include #operaplot, which of course is what got me on Twitter in the first place, and its subsidiaries: #operaplotpalindrome, #operasequel, #operacrostic, and #operagram.]

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2010

### *Should there be a "Free the Movements" Movement?*

Among the many odd conventions classical musicians take for granted is the organization of large works into individual *movements*. The word *movement* itself is an odd one if you think about it, and the practice of withholding applause between movements always seems to come up as something that mystifies the uninitiated. There is a sort of an analogy to the way in which plays are divided into acts and novels into chapters, but most plays and novels have a more explicit narrative connection that makes these subsections more obviously interdependent than is generally the case with musical movements. Sure, a composer can connect various movements by means of key, motif, transitions, attacas, etc., but such connections tend to be notable as exceptions to the rule, and they still don't mean the movements in question can't stand alone.

But, at least within the oh-so-serious classical music culture that has developed in the last hundred years, there's a pretty strong bias against presenting single movements as freestanding. Of course, there are plenty of special contexts (group recitals, examinations, auditions, competitions, Pops concerts, celebratory occasions, elevators, etc.) in which exceptions are made, but they kind of prove the rule. How often does a major orchestra or a Carnegie Hall recitalist feature a disconnected movement in a regular program? (Individual movements from suites or other more loosely connected sets of pieces don't count.) There may be plenty of good reasons for this self-consciously organic way of thinking, but it's certainly not that individual sonata/concerto/symphony movements can't stand on their own.

I thought of this while attending a piano student's senior recital on Sunday afternoon. This was a non-required recital, which meant there was considerably more programming freedom than the typical degree recital would allow. Included were three substantial movements from larger works, and I was surprised at how satisfying it was to hear them this way. Maybe I was surprised because I hear disconnected movements all the time in weekly performance classes, general student recitals, and the like - and such contexts can induce a kind of listening whiplash that accentuates the fragmenting. In this case, each movement was given a chance to make its own complete statement, partly because each fit nicely into a well-planned program, with the Intermission helping to frame the events.

I have to admit I was skeptical about the decision to end the first half of the recital with the "slow" 2nd movement of Schubert's E-flat Piano Trio, but this was the movement that the student and her chamber group had ready to play. I should mention that this trio is one of my all-time favorite pieces; I love the 1st and 4th movements, and I especially love the way the main theme of this 2nd movement returns in the 4th. Thus, I already had a bit of bias against playing just a single movement. Furthermore, "slow" movements are so often defined by the way in which they provide contrast to surrounding fast movements. Taking this out of context and using it to end a recital half (ending with something slow?) seemed like a compromise of necessity more than anything.

So, of course, it turned out that I loved it! It happens to be a very substantial "slow" movement, with a dramatic climax, and although I knew that, I'm not sure I'd ever thought about how "feature-length" it can feel. In the full trio, the weary, even devastating ending of the 2nd movement is quickly followed by a light-hearted country dance scherzo and then a long-ish finale - here, we got to walk quietly out into the Intermission with that heartrending cello theme still floating in the air. Let's face it, Schubert's

"heavenly length" has its advantages and disadvantages, but I can genuinely say I found new things to love about this movement hearing it this way, even though I'd just coached the performers in it a few days before!

After intermission, our pianist came back out to play another "slow movement," the 3rd movement ("The Alcotts") of Charles Ives legendary "Concord" Sonata. This is actually the second time I've had a student learn this "work"; it's not easy, by any means, but it's not nearly as ferocious a challenge as the other three movements, especially movements 1 and 2. In fact, I'm not sure I'll ever be up to the task of learning the entire sonata myself, though I like to dream, but "The Alcotts" is such special music and so unique that it would be a great shame to fence it off from pianists not ready to tackle "Emerson" and "Hawthorne." So, I already knew this piece can stand on its own; but hearing in on a late Autumn New England afternoon, with a picture-window view of woods and pond (we have a really lovely recital hall!) behind the pianist was...well, this is why we bother with music in the first place. It worked deeply and beautifully. And, yes, as with the Schubert, there are motives (the Beethoven 5th theme, especially) and ideas that connect "The Alcotts" to its sibling movements, but whereas one usually hears it as a kind of relief after the wildness of "Hawthorne," one could appreciate how wide-ranging, full-hearted, and complete these few pages are. [Here's](#) Ives himself playing:

Now I'm not saying that every movement of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, etc. needs to be set free in this way, but I think there's a lesson here about the value of hearing the familiar in a new context. There's also the reminder that musical narratives are, generally speaking, much more flexible than theatrical/literary narratives. Coincidentally, both the Schubert and Ives movements have found lives in some unusual pop culture contexts. [Here's](#) a Bruce Hornsby song that begins with a nod to the Ives and I only just encountered [this highly unexpected use](#) of the Schubert. Well then. (Oh, I guess the Schubert also made its way into *Barry Lyndon*.)

There are some notable examples of single movements which have taken on lives of their own. There's the whole elegy subcategory represented by Barber's *Adagio* (originally a movement from his *String Quartet* - note that the *Adagio* partly was freed by the fact that the composer only orchestrated this movement, giving it a sort of "blessing"), Elgar's *Nimrod*, and Mahler's *Adagietto*. There's a [scherzo](#) by Litolff which is virtually all the poor composer is known for, although the practice of extracting it from its *Concerto Symphonique No. 4* hearkens back to a day when the playing of excerpted movements was more common.

Mozart's *Rondo alla turca* and the 1st movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* are certainly much better-known than their siblings, but I doubt one would run across them alone on any sort of standard recital. The finale of Beethoven's 9th gets out on its own every now and then as well, and then there's that strange [pair](#) of Schubert movements that never got "finished" - of course, they are finished, as evidenced by the fact that they're played all the time, but would anyone have ever thought to perform them that way if they hadn't been orphaned?

My student's recital concluded with the grand first movement of Schumann's *Piano Concerto*. Here we have a work originally conceived as a single-movement *Fantasy*, so the fact that one would almost never hear it alone on a standard orchestra program isn't because Schumann wouldn't have imagined it that way - it's because his later decision to add two movements effectively put a "reverse blessing" on the practice. Honestly, as much as I adore this entire concerto, I've never felt the 2nd movement quite measured up, and the finale, while exhilarating, is also not quite as perfect as the 1st. So, another big

success on what turned out to be a thoroughly effective and "complete" program. Perhaps some day we'll live in a world where movements can move freely about the earth, less constrained by the curatorial mindset that wants to insist always on complete sets. (Think of the creative programming potential!) Fragments are nice, too.

UPDATE: Just remembered (via overhearing a student conversation) Brahms' fabulous **Scherzo** from the quirky collaborative **F-A-E Sonata**. Because Brahms didn't write the other movements of that larger work, performers have generally felt free to play the Brahms as a freestanding piece - something that they would probably never do with a single movement from a Brahms sonata/trio/quartet.



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2010

## *Bach Doubled*

So, in our last [episode](#), I wondered about the ways in which we all take for granted that most major instrumental pieces are broken up into distinct (often self-sufficient) movements - distinct movements which, nevertheless, are generally expected to be performed in the context of the whole. In other words, the serious classical artist doesn't generally record or perform in recital just a single movement of a Beethoven sonata or Mozart symphony. I mentioned a few exceptions to that rule, but for better or for worse, the bias against excerpting movements is pretty strong. (It's always one of the chief complaints about the less high-minded classical radio stations that they dare to play unattached movements - I should know, having made this complaint many times!)

So, if pulling movements out on their own is frowned upon, I'd guess it would be even more controversial to re-order movements within a tidily assembled work or - horror! - to patch various movements into a new whole. But, quietly geeky radical that I am, I do find myself having such thoughts, three of which I'll share here - all of them, curiously, having to do with violin repertoire. (I can't really explain why that is, other than that I love the violin repertoire.) The first two "thought experiments" are pretty straightforward, and mainly noteworthy because I think they'd 1) work really well and 2) would probably never be seriously considered by anyone. The third one has spawned both the title of this post and something altogether more interesting.

**Switcheroo #1:** Back in September, I [twitterred](#) about my idea that Brahms' amazingly wonderful third violin sonata might be just a tad more amazingly wonderful if the 2nd and 3rd of its four movements were swapped. Honestly, my reasoning is more intuitive than anything else (and, I know, who am I to put my intuition up against Brahms?), but the song-like 2nd movement has such a radiantly tender, calm-before-storm quality that it feels right to me for it to precede the violently stormy finale. Meanwhile, the nervous hesitations of the scherzo seem to fit nicely after the weary ending of the passionate first movement. I'm perfectly content for others to disagree with me about this, and it's always hard to argue against the rightness of familiarity, but I think it would be a lovely idea to try this 1324 order out in performance - and yet, innocent and simple though the change would be, it feels like it would be some sort of violation. Here's a helpful [playlist](#) in which you can try out *my* version...if you dare!

**Switcheroo #2:** This is maybe even more radical, though no less innocently simple in concept, but the truth is I've never been *completely* in love with any of the Mozart violin concerti. Not that they need my love or anything, and sure, he was a young composer when he wrote them, etc., etc. I do think the 5th and final concerto is mostly ideal *except* it just doesn't have a great second movement. Or, let me put it more bluntly: its second movement is not as perfect as the slow movement of the 3rd concerto. That slow movement is as divinely inspired as anything Mozart ever wrote. For whatever reason, the slow movement of *Concerto #5* always sounds to me like a melody in search of...well, in search of that tune from the *Concerto #3*.

So, if I were somehow transformed into an internationally-acclaimed violin virtuoso asked to play a Mozart concerto for an upcoming gig, I would seriously want to propose my own little hybrid concerto. The key relationships work out just fine: A Major, D Major, A Major. (The "original" 2nd mvt of *Concerto #5* is in E Major; up a 5th, down a 5th. Same difference.) You can try it out with this little [playlist](#). It's

not like I'm proposing first movement from Sibelius, second from Bruch, and third from Brahms. Just three Mozart movements which would complement each other beautifully. One of his piano sonatas (K.533/494) is basically a hybrid as well, its third movement having been composed first and then added to two other movements at the request of a publisher. Maybe I'm not supposed to say this, but a lot of Mozart and Haydn movements are somewhat interchangeable - but we never get to play around with them. Pianists get to make their own multi-movement composite Scarlatti sets all the time (since his so-called sonatas are all single-movement works), but convention denies us that creative option with most other composers.

My last example is a bit different, as here it's more a problem of a work that has proportional issues. (By the way, if you think it's impudent of me to be challenging the final shape given to works by Brahms and Mozart, then imagine my trepidation at finding fault with Bach - and not just any Bach, but one of his revered works for unaccompanied violin.) Well, a few months ago, my violinist daughter was assigned her first-ever solo Bach - a deeply meaningful milestone to me. Curiously, her marvelously old-school Russian teacher decided to start with what to me is the most musically severe and uncompromising of these works, the *Partita No. 1 in B Minor*. It consists of eight binary-form dance movements, but it's really four dances, each of which is each then followed by a variation called a *Double*. Curious things, these Doubles. Each has the exact same formal and harmonic shape as the dance that precedes it, but the Doubles generally feature faster and more evenly flowing note values, meaning the dance character is sublimated a bit. All of the dances are in B minor (an **austere key** for Bach), and all are rather **severe** in shape and gesture - dances, yes, but not quite like listening to the *Nutcracker Suite*.

So my problem has always been that, as a listening experience, the eight movements back-to-back-to-back-etc. can be a bit too much. [...dodging lightning bolt...] What vexes me particularly is hearing each dance played with repeats and then hearing the Doubles traverse the same territory, with the same repeats. In fact, the first time I saw the score, I assumed the Doubles were intended as alternate ways to play the repeats, and I still think this could be an interesting approach. But, it seems the most common approach is to be a good soldier and play everything as written. If the violinist is good enough, the experience can be richly rewarding, as this is some of the most profound and centering music ever written...but still. I can't help but help wonder if Bach would ever have imagined hearing this music presented in recital in such a way. Again, if I could suddenly be a great violinist, I'd be tempted to perform the work either with no repeats or, better yet, with the Doubles acting as the repeats. I have **heard of pianists** interspersing works by Schoenberg amongst the movements of Bach sets as a way of opening ears to the cross-century connection\*; I wish artists would be as open to re-imagining ways of presenting a single composer's works.

But my favorite discovery out all of this came from thinking of another way of dealing with those Doubles. It occurred to me that they could perhaps be played simultaneously with their dances as duets. A quick experiment with the opening *Allemanda* was somewhat disappointing as there was too much literal doubling between the two parts. However, the *Courante* and its *Double* proved to be a revelation. I imagine violinists must have tried this out on occasion - maybe with teacher and student in lessons - but my not-extensive Googling hasn't turned anything up in the way of recordings. So, I went to work with a couple of the virtual violinists residing in my computer and, voilà, a strikingly successful duet.\*\* It's almost as if Bach intended these movements to be "mashed up," as they mostly move in contrary motion to each other, the slashing sixteenth notes of the Double parrying the more

angular eighth-notes of the original *Courante*. My favorite piece of music in the whole world is probably Bach's *Double Violin Concerto*, known far and wide as "The Bach Double," but it's rather satisfying to have stumbled on this new "Bach Double" (a much bigger success than this bizarre "Bach Double" I created a while back.)



A couple of final points: I'm rather proud of the way the video above traces the two separate scores. In an ideal world, I'd have taken the time to format both movements nicely into duet form, but it's kind of fun trying to follow both scores at once. [Here's another Bach animation of mine that lets you do something similar.] It's a reminder that counterpoint is always a kind of "mash-up." One of the joys of counterpoint is the experience of experiencing multiple distinct strands simultaneously; mash-ups can often be engaging for the same reason. In these *multi-tasking times*, perhaps Bach's music is more timely than ever.

---

\* Note that Andrew Rangell, the pianist who interspersed Bach with Schoenberg for a conference recital, is *quoted* as saying he'd never do that in a "real" concert. What a crazy world we live in!

\*\* As it happens, another work my daughter is studying now is a Wieniawski *Etude-Caprice*, which comes with its own accompanying part for a second violinist. So, I guess I have had violin duets on the brain...

UPDATE: A Twitter colleague, the very knowledgeable JoseSPiano, *mentioned* hearing violinist Daniel Heifetz perform the *Partita No. 2 in D Minor* WITHOUT the concluding *Chaconne*. The 15-minute *Chaconne* is perhaps Bach's most monumental achievement, but it dwarfs the four much briefer dance movements that precede it. I've no doubt that the Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue make a wonderful set on their own, and this practice would allow them to be heard differently, much like what I said about movements by Schubert and Ives in my last *post*.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2010

## *Sleigh Ride in a Fast Machine*

Yes, it's been a slow ride here on the blog this Fall, but I do still churn out my share of words on **Twitter**, having just hit the 3500 "tweets" milestone. You can see all 3500 on one page **here** (warning: page may load slowly). Every now and then I get off a decent one-liner, like with **this tweet**.

And, every other now and then, the Twitter world inspires something over here on the blog. So it is that one @AndreiStrizek, having noticed my inability to resist a good mashup, sent out a good-natured **challenge** for a melding of two John Adams' works (*Nixon in China* and *China Gates*) into a *Nixon in China Gates*. Good idea, combining musical and verbal puns, kind of like with my *The Rite of Appalachian Spring*. But I don't really know my Adams all that well, and it's not like I've got all day to sit around doing this sort of thing. However, the music appreciation text I use does feature Adams' popular little curtainraiser *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, so I've gotten to know it well enough - and once the post title above occurred to me, the following was beyond inevitable:



My poor family. My wife and oldest daughter just sort of sigh now when they hear these kinds of sounds emanating from my "man cave" - but, hey, I've been reporting to work all week while sick and coming home exhausted. If I choose to do this with my evening time instead of watching two hours of TV, who's to judge?

It's not the most sophisticated thing, but it did take some tempo tweaking to make things work out right, and the ending required a bit of manipulation. The rest is pretty much straightforward mashing, but I think it works - going on **this Sleigh Ride** seems downright boring now. As for the animations...well, I set myself a strict time limit, so nothing sophisticated there. Kind of in the same vein as **Swan Loop**, if you want to chart connections with my previous work, as future historians will no doubt be doing.

FRIDAY, APRIL 22, 2011

## Good Friday Bach

I've been teaching Bach's Easter Cantata, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, in as many classes as possible for years now. I know it's one of his earlier works and doesn't display all the sophistication of some of the later more elegant, Italianate cantatas, but it's my single favorite choral work of Bach or anyone else. Of course, the *St. Matthew Passion* is a more obvious Good Friday choice, and I have been teaching that more and more as well, but it's so monumental that I'm still a bit intimidated by it. (Actually, one of my problems with the *St. Matthew Passion* is that I find the **orchestral opening** so perfect, that even the magnificent choral writing that follows feels like a *slight* letdown.)

Anyway, one of the odd things about *Christ lag in Todesbanden* is that, though it is a celebratory Easter piece, it is full of dark, grim imagery - just as Christians see Good Friday as something hopeful in the face of sorrow, Luther's hymn text takes an "already and the not yet" approach to Easter; throughout the hymn, we feel the anguish of living in a world where sin and Death are still present, even if the victory has been won. The relentless E minor tonality, the funereal tread of the Sinfonia and Verses 1 and 2, the fierce battle of Verse 4, and the impassioned lament of Verse 5 all evoke a mood far different from the typically exuberant Easter anthem. Even the giddy Hallelujahs that end Verse 1 are almost manic in their contrapuntal density. It feels almost as appropriate to Good Friday as it does to Easter.

This past week, I've been teaching the cantata as part of a big, general arts lecture class. It is ambitious material to expose to the musically uninitiated, but I can't help but want to try. (I take comfort in the fact that Leonard Bernstein says much the same thing in his Bach chapter in *The Joy of Music*\*) In past years, I've had online audio of the music available with some captioned listening pointers, and of course I've done my best in class lectures to walk students through various high points in the score. Still, it occurred to me that students listening on their own could use more help, so I decided to create videos with scores. As I've **written before**, this kind of online score can work well for someone who doesn't read music because the pages turn automatically, so you can't get lost for long - plus, in a vocal work like this, there are words to follow.

But the really new thing for me is using YouTube's built-in annotation feature to point specifically to all sorts of wondrous Bachian details. Having spent countless hours the past few days getting these annotations to work just so, I can't say for sure that I'd recommend it. There are much easier ways to insert text/highlights/etc in other video-editing programs that would provide a lot more flexibility; but the YouTube captions have two big advantages: 1) I can constantly edit and update them without having to recreate/reupload the video; 2) the annotations can easily be turned on and off by the viewer on the fly. (A downside is that I don't know of any easy way to transport these annotations out of YouTube, so they're kind of stuck there; but it's such a widely used platform, I can live with that.)

So, what we have here are densely packed listening guides for 5 of the 8 movements from the cantata. I may do the other 3 at some point, but 5 movements is enough for my class, and this makes me feel slightly less guilty about blatantly using copyrighted audio. I'm not quite sure what to say about this copyright question. I will certainly remove these videos if asked to do so by the copyright holders, but the truth is that, for reasons I don't fully understand, YouTube is packed with copyrighted material. In

the case of these fantastic recordings by John Eliot Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir, I'd certainly encourage anyone who likes them to [purchase the CD](#), which is clearly linked on all the videos.

At least I've added real value to the recordings from an educational perspective. In fact, there's so much information at some points that it will probably be intimidating for students, but I'd stress that there's no need to take everything in at once - indeed, there are countless details that are still left unannotated, but I'd hope that even one or two little insights per movement could be catalysts for deeper, more engaged listening.

Although I originally intended to do little more than add text comments, I ended up getting addicted to the possibility of highlighting important musical lines. (This is what became so time-consuming, getting all the highlights to happen in real time.) The most satisfying results of this are some of the faster moments where the highlight boxes seem to dance across the score, especially in the Hallelujahs that conclude Verses 1 and 5. As someone who loves sightreading, I hope these listening guides give some sense of the kind of joy I get from watching notes dart across a page.

All the videos can be found on a [single page here](#), a page which also contains some background information on the work, links to translations, a recording of the chorale tune alone, etc. I'd highly recommend heading over there. But, you can also sample the new videos below. My favorite annotations include the Hallelujahs at the ends of Verse 1 (Go to 3:30) and Verse 5 (3:45) and all the suspensions in Verse 2. If you don't know this music, it is well worth knowing.

\* Speaking of Bernstein's *The Joy of Music*, I've actually been using that as a textbook for my arts class, mainly because reading it as a teenager impacted me about as much as anything I've ever read. Anchoring this unusual book are seven tele-scripts from live lectures Bernstein gave on the *Omnibus* arts program back in the '50s. Imagine my delight when I discovered that all of these lectures, which I'd never seen before, are now available on DVD and, yes, YouTube.

*Except*, I'm not sure I like the lectures as much in their TV versions. Amazing as it is that Bernstein could pull this kind of thing off on live network TV, his talking actually comes across as too scripted for my taste. This is a curious paradox because what I've always loved about reading the scripts is that they sound so naturally conversational, but I imagine the pressure of delivering the words on live TV (and coordinating so much musical activity) makes them come off as canned. The pace is often slow, and some of the banter sounds anything but spontaneous. Indeed, poor Bernstein looks pretty stressed at some points - I especially love his hair at the 4:15 mark of this [video](#). (But again, let me stress, these lectures were performed *live* - I get stressed out talking to 75 students at once and hoping my PowerPoint and iPod won't let me down.)

The other problem is that the musical performances (with the exception of Bernstein's keyboard playing) often sound just awful, especially the choral examples from the *St. Matthew Passion* - and, my goodness, [who dressed this choir](#)? It's fascinating to listen to Bernstein feeling that he has to [make a case](#) (9:19 mark) for Bach; these videos are a good reminder that this music was less widely loved and understood than it is now, and we've certainly come a long way in learning how to sing this music. Still, I can't recommend Bernstein-on-Bach highly enough - and if you have to watch the videos instead, both Lenny and Johann are still pretty compelling.

SUNDAY, APRIL 24, 2011

*Und singen Halleluja!*

As I **mentioned way back on Good Friday**, Bach's *Cantata No. 4 "Christ lag in Todesbanden"* is really an Easter cantata, though it is much more grim in tone than the **typical Easter fare**. But, it is truly joyful music, even if the joy is not always bubbling over on the surface. Leonard Bernstein says of Bach, in **this 1950's TV show**:

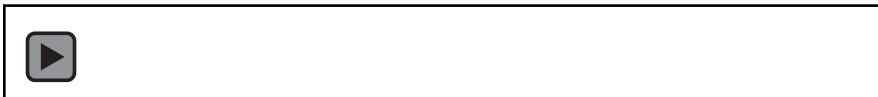
There are great beauties hidden in this music, only they're not so immediate as we expect them to be. They lie beneath the surface, so to speak, but because they do, they don't rub off so easily; they last and last.

Bernstein spends the remainder of that program (with the "help" of an **absurdly dressed choir**) highlighting some of those hidden beauties. There's more **skepticism** in our current culture about this sort of directed listening approach; for some, being told what to listen for can apparently take the joy out of the listening experience, making it seem more like an exam than something pleasurable. All I can say is that reading Bernstein's *The Joy of Music* (which includes the tele-script for that Bach program) more than two decades ago was ridiculously exciting for me.

So, my new little **annotated listening guides** for *Christ lag in Todesbanden* are designed with the idea that there's real joy in the search for subtlety - in the case of this cantata, those subtleties include not only intricate musical details about counterpoint and the like, but also the composer's extraordinary sensitivity to intricate details of theology. Just as Bernstein suggests that the joy of Bach's music isn't always readily apparent, Bach understood that the joy of Easter is bound up with some pretty serious stuff.

This is evident right away in the **Verse 1 movement** which begins almost as a funeral march, putting the emphasis squarely on Death and sin ("Christ lay in Death's bands, given over for our sins."). The basses keep heading straight to the basement of their ranges and the counterpoint is filled with thorny, twisting chromaticism (using notes outside of the main key). However, beginning with the third phrase ("Er ist wieder erstanden" [He has risen again]), the tenors introduce a rising countersubject that starts the music on its journey to the light. The fifth phrase calls us to be joyful ("fröhlich"), and the counterpoint starts to dance in response. When the seventh and final phrase calls for "singing Hallelujah," the Hallelujahs enter tentatively at first, but they start to multiply and grow in confidence until, finally, the music explodes into a thrilling, double-time "Hallelujah chorus." The entire movement, then, is a slow unfolding of Easter joy, like a cloudy sunrise service that ends in cold, but brilliant light.

Verse 1 Hallelujahs



But that's just a start. One of my favorite features of the cantata is the widely different ways in which Bach treats the singing of "Hallelujah," which appears at the end of each verse of Luther's hymn and each movement of the cantata. The **second movement** is just about the saddest music I know,



funereal in tone throughout, with soprano and alto lamenting above a steadily processing cello; so it's almost stunning to have these words end with "Hallelujah." [Translation from [Emmanuel Music](#).]

No one could defeat death  
among all humanity,  
this was all because of our sins,  
no innocence was to be found.  
Therefore death came so soon  
and took power over us,  
held us captive in his kingdom.  
Hallelujah!

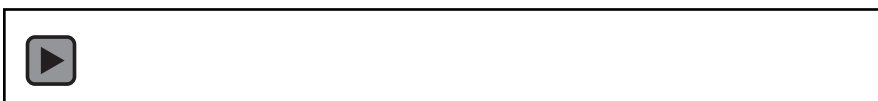
Bach responds to this challenge with three achingly drawn-out sets of "Hallelujahs": the first is little more than two overlapping, descending scales, intensified by constant suspensions as the alto lags a step behind the soprano. In the second set, the soprano starts up higher (an outburst of weeping?) on the unstable seventh scale degree, and now lags behind the alto; the mood is one of quiet desperation. The third set brings the two voices back towards each other, with the alto now rising up to meet the soprano; this leads to a fourth and final "Hallelujah" which is shorter and unified at last. These Hallelujahs remind us that there is power in word and truth, even in the darkest hour.

#### Verse 2 Hallelujahs



In the defiant **third verse**, Bach provides a melodramatic image of Death losing its power; the violins are in constant motion throughout the movement until we're told that "there remains nothing but Death's form," at which point there is a chilling silence and the accompaniment goes cold as we see (hear) Death's own ghost float by. The Hallelujahs that follow invite the tenors to taunt death ("its sting is lost forever") with virtuosic unison flourishes - the joy of victory.

#### Verse 3 Hallelujahs



The **fifth verse** is the most intensely personal in tone, as Bach responds to the Passover imagery of the Easter lamb, roasted high on the cross, marking the door and keeping us safe from Death. There are numerous symbolic references to the cross, both in melodic shapes and in the use of the crossed sharp sign (#) itself. (See [Listening Guide](#) for details.) The most dramatic moment occurs when the bass drops to a long, low E# on the word "Tod" (Death). There follows a resolute proclamation that the

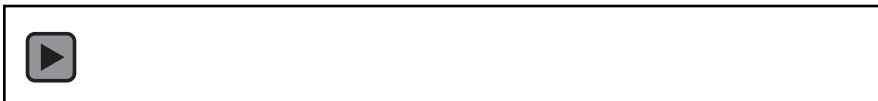
"Strangler" can no longer do harm - you can hear Death's power fading away as the word "nicht" is repeated.

Although the first movement has the most thrilling set of "Hallelujahs," this fifth movement features the most dramatic emotional progression. Following on that realization that Death has lost its power, it's almost as if the bass voice is trying "Hallelujahs" on for size, tentatively at first. The interval of a rising 4th becomes prominent, and in the listening guide you can see that the violins seem to be urging the singers on, with the rising 4ths rising ever higher and coming more quickly. The final melodic gesture spans a full two octaves.



This is a joy grounded in Faith and a firm resolve.

Verse 5 Hallelujahs



I haven't yet prepared listening guides for Verses 4 (a vivid battle scene) and 6 (a dancing celebration), but the examples provided above are evidence enough of how vividly and with what variety Bach can respond to a musical/textual challenge. Alleluias are traditionally silenced throughout Lent\*, but they make a stirring comeback in this magnificent Easter work.

---

\* Yes, this argues against my **idea** that this is an appropriate Good Friday piece.

TUESDAY, APRIL 26, 2011

## *Meta-unpredictability*

I've been working on a little article inspired by Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, starting off with an observation I've made many times here and elsewhere - that this is music meant to suggest a primitive, prehistoric civilization, yet it requires a remarkably civilized and well-trained group of about 100 players to perform. It's rigorous, modernist music intended to help us escape from the rigors of modernism. One of my lines that got left on the cutting-room floor is the observation that "if Malcolm Gladwell's **10,000-Hour Rule** applies to top-flight orchestra musicians, then a first-class performance of *The Rite* would require a million or more combined hours of practice." That's a lot of lessons, etudes, patient parents, youth orchestra rehearsals, etc. Of course, the same could be said for just about any work requiring a large orchestra (which is one reason I abandoned the quote), but it has particular resonance when considering the wild and disordered effect this music can have.

Since that tension (prehistoric vs. ultra-modern) has long been what fascinates me most about this music, I was a bit disappointed to discover that Leonard Bernstein said/wrote the following **in a book that's been sitting on my shelf** for more than twenty years, though I've never read it:

But the most striking semantic effects of Stravinsky's primitivism results from the utterly modern sophistication with which it is treated. There is an exciting friction here of conflicting forces: after all, here's a thoroughly twentieth century composer writing prehistoric music. It's a glorious misalliance, producing glorious offspring - a synthesis of earthy vernacular embedded in stylistic sophistication. (359)

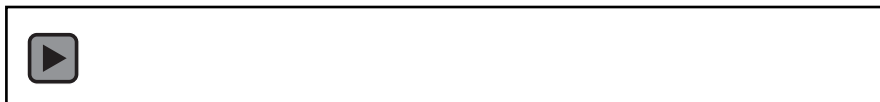
OK, so I suppose it's a pretty obvious point anyway, and I'm sure many others have made it. And I'm sure others have critiqued Stravinsky for appropriating his own idealized idea of the past into something that really reflects the present, but that's a question for another day.

However, I'm also regretting not having read *The Unanswered Question* because of another observation Bernstein makes about *The Rite of Spring*. He writes:

[of a specific passage] That page is sixty years old, but it's never been topped for sophisticated handling of primitive rhythms...[more broadly] it's also got the best dissonances anyone ever thought up, and the best asymmetries and polytonalities, and polyrhythms, and whatever else you care to name. (357)

I'm particularly intrigued by that idea of writing "the best asymmetries" because I've listened to this music countless times, and I still find that it sounds *unpredictable*, even though I pretty much know exactly what's going to happen. As with a great suspense novel or horror film, what Stravinsky has managed is to create a sort of permanent *meta-unpredictability*; he's encoded the idea of *unpredictability* into something that's stable, yet volatile.

I experimented with this idea a few years back when I created *Mr. Stravinsky's Random Accent Generator*. The inspiration came from my own experience of knowing the "asymmetrical" accents in this iconic passage so well that I wondered if they'd lost their unpredictable punch.



It took awhile to build my little machine, so I ended up not having much time **to write about it** at the time (I guess this is the followup post!), but the idea is that each time you reload the page, you get a different set of accents from what Stravinsky penned - and that should *really* put you on your toes as a listener. **Go give it a try!**

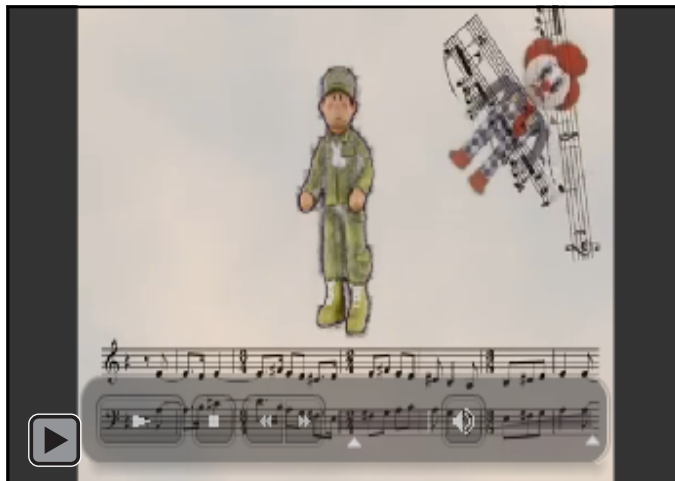


But I soon discovered that it didn't work - at least not for me. Stravinsky's predictable asymmetries still did the best job of sounding menacingly off-kilter. Now, of course, there's some conditioning bias at play here - I've heard Stravinsky's accents a lot, so they have a certain rightness that goes along with that. In fact, I'm sure that part of the satisfaction I get from hearing them is in feeling good that I can predict when those unpredictable accents will occur. It's an ego boost. It makes me feel smart. (Every now and then, I wonder how much of the music aficionado's love for music is fed by this sort of ego boost, but I digress...) Still, I think there's more to it than that. I think Bernstein is right that Stravinsky "has the best asymmetries" - that his formulations are calculated so well that they embody the idea of unpredictability more than they sound unpredictable.

This, of course, is something art does all the time. A deceptive cadence doesn't have to be unfamiliar to deliver an **expressive punch** that *means* surprise. A perfectly timed line delivery can make a **comic moment** funny every time, even if we've heard the line a hundred times. Climactic "one more time" **evaded cadences** can be thrilling every time. A **guillotine blow** can be chilling every time. We happily surrender again and again to the feeling that a great artistic moment can summon. Stravinsky's very specific accents will always work against the well-ingrained assumption that music should fall into regular patterns of stressed beats. Bernstein refers to this as "rhythmic dissonance" (345), so I suppose my couching it in terms of unpredictability isn't quite right, but it's the experience I get listening, even when I know exactly what's coming.

Still, part of me would like to see an orchestra mix up Stravinsky's accents just a little bit every now and then...just to keep us on our toes while we're being surprised. And I'm sure there's always a horn player willing to oblige...

SATURDAY, JUNE 4, 2011

*Multimedia Moonlight March Madness Mashup*

I guess can I start by saying this: if I hadn't created this video, no one else would have. So there's that.

I'm not quite sure how I ended up so far down this rabbit hole, but as always, the journey is at least part of the purpose, even if it's a rather purposeless journey. As I **wrote** a few days ago, **operamission's double bill** of Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* and Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* got me to thinking about these classic works as a team; the realization that they feature similar riffs (see below) led to the creation of a little mashup version of the two, which **debuted in audio format** on Wednesday.



The riffs aren't exactly the same, but each winds its way through a couple of descending triads in a manner that started a sort of conversation between the two works in my mind. And, come to think of it, that's so often what listening to music is about - a conversation of ideas, both as they occur within given pieces and as they converse (via the brain) with all sorts of other ideas. So, this kind of mashup, silly though it may seem, does say something genuine about the musical experience. If it's true(-ish) that talking/writing about music is like dancing about architecture, then perhaps creating musical mashups is a more logical way of "discussing" music - although that's not stopping me from multiplying words here.

Anyway, once the audio was created, I knew another challenge awaited - creating the video. Partly this just has to do with the fact that [MMtube](#) is where so many of my multimedia creations live; somehow an MP3 doesn't seem like enough, especially since YouTube offers the possibility of so many more viewers. But, as with [The Rite of Appalachian Spring](#), [Chopin's Ghosts](#), [Canon a 2 Tempi](#), and many other mashups, the visual component can also help to clarify what's going on.

Speaking of "conversing about music," I found that thinking about how to use the score excerpts helped me to understand the Stravinsky better - as it happened, I didn't have a full score on hand when I started (although I do have one from the library in hand now), just the quirky MIDI-generated score I'd used for the audio. Because this half-baked score doesn't have all the correct articulation markings, I decided I'd rather feature single instruments most of the time, and the idea of having the notes dance around the screen came from not wanting them to be scrutinized too closely. So, making decisions about how the various instrumental tunes should pop off the page made me aware of how beautifully Stravinsky uses his forces. For the Schoenberg, I did have a full score on hand, but again it proved easier to recreate the notes in [Finale](#) (which means, for example, that there can always be a clef, etc.) - and, again, it proved very gratifying to get to know these little musical gestures better.

Although I haven't seen it in many years, I was probably influenced in the basic look of the video by R. O. Blechman's [animated film](#) of *The Soldier's Tale* [see sample [here](#)] - especially, the idea of sparse textures and, from what I recall, a sort of dreamscape look, with objects flying in and out. Certainly, *Pierrot lunaire* should be expected to have a hallucinogenic effect on whatever it encounters. (If you've been following this blog the past few weeks, you'll recognize that I borrowed [Pierrot](#) from the little xtranormal videos I made [here](#).) I love the idea of animating musical notes (as in this [fantastic video](#) I *wish* I could say I'd made) and enjoyed this exercise in tossing them around on screen with Pierrot-like abandon.

By the way, [operamission's](#) final performance of these two fascinating works is tonight, and if, like me, you won't be lucky enough to be there in person, you can watch the show live online by going [here](#). I believe they'll be performing the two works separately, but they're pretty interesting that way as well.

---

P.S. In poking around YouTube, I also stumbled across this [cool animation](#) of excerpts from *The Soldier's Tale*. Check it out.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8, 2011

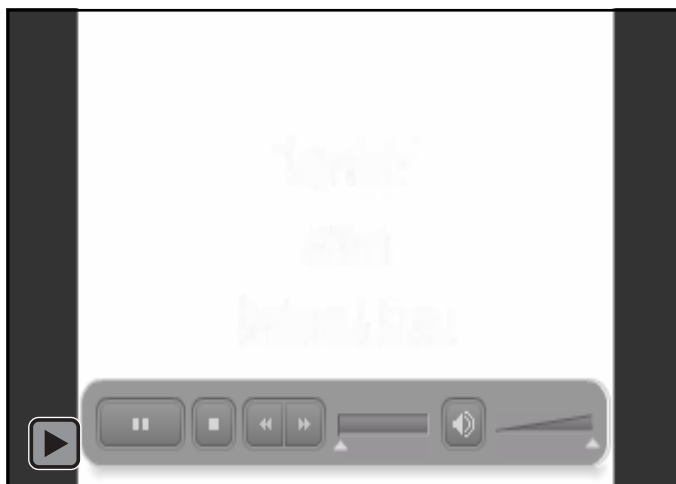
## *Somewhere between Beethoven and Strauss*

So I turned on classical radio yesterday, something I don't do all that often, and found myself in the middle of a wacky piano concerto thing. At first it seemed to be in a Schumann/Brahms style, but I soon realized it was a bit later than either of them stylistically. Eventually, I decided it must be the *Burleske* of Richard Strauss - a piece I've known of for years, but have never gotten to know. However, as I was settling on "Strauss; in the Burleske; with the lead pipe," the mostly lively piece settled into a slow-ish, nostalgic bit and suddenly I wondered if I'd wandered into some sort of *West Side Story* piano concerto (it's *been done* for violin) as an unmistakable phrase from "Somewhere" floated by.

But, it did turn out to be Strauss, and as I was driving along, it occurred to me that Beethoven had already supplied the first phrase of "Somewhere" in the *slow movement* of the "Emperor" Concerto. (That's a pretty commonly made observation.) I knew then it was my job to go home and stitch the Beethoven and Strauss together into a little Bernstein. I wasn't surprised to find that others have also cited the "Somewhere" connection in the Strauss, most notably in this [YouTube video](#), which cleverly pairs Glenn Gould's discussion of the Strauss with Barbra Streisand's rendition of the Bernstein. ("Clever" because Gould was a *big fan* of Streisand.) Still, I wanted a real mashup.

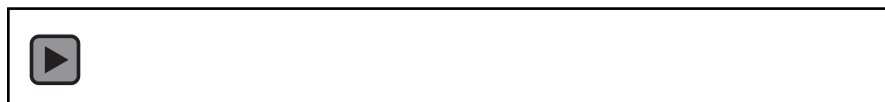
Because I was so eager to get right to it, I went straight to the second half of the *Burleske*, found the tune, and discovered that the Beethoven and Strauss components were a full tritone apart. Unfazed, I found that by transposing Beethoven down a m3 and Strauss up a m3, I could get them to match without the audio sounding too muddled from the pitch-shifting. Only as I began writing this post did it occur to me that maybe I should listen to the whole *Burleske* to see when and how else the tune is used. Well, wouldn't you know, the tune appears early on IN THE SAME KEY AS THE BEETHOVEN! (Technically the Beethoven's in B Major and the Strauss is in G-sharp Minor, but same key signature and, most importantly, same notes in the tune.) Quite a "coincidence," Mr. Bernstein! So, if I'd just done my research first, I would've saved some time.

Anyway, here's what they sound like together:





Here's what the Strauss tune sounds like in broader context.



You can listen to the complete *Burleske* [here](#) and [here](#).

And [here's](#) how my first mashup came out - the one where I had to transpose the two tunes. I like it because the cellos play along with this second statement of the Strauss tune. So beautiful.

FRIDAY, JUNE 10, 2011

## *Mozart Mashup Medley*

My last [post/video](#) reminded me of how much fun it can be to create horizontal mashups. Though the word mashup generally refers to a piece which layers two or more existing works on top of each other, it can also be enlightening (or, at least, fun) to weave back and forth between two pieces. In my last post, I was showing how Bernstein's "Somewhere" can be generated by gliding from a Beethoven piano concerto into a Strauss piano concerto. This reminded me of several other little projects from my blogging past.



But all these years, I've had a bigger project in mind. Mozart's last three violin concerti (#3-5) are all pretty equally well-known and oft-played; at least, I've accompanied each of them many times. I like them enough, but it's always struck me how interchangeable they seem to be in the kinds of passagework they feature. The joke is often made (unfairly) that Vivaldi wrote one concerto hundreds of times. Well, I'm not saying that Mozart wrote one great violin concerto three times, but he does seem to be working with the same set of building materials in each case, especially in the first movements. Actually, I can never hear the slow movement of the 5th concerto without feeling that it's trying to be (and, simultaneously, trying not to be) the slow movement of the 3rd concerto. I even [proposed](#) once that my ideal Mozart violin concerto\* would be the outer movements of #5 sandwiched around the slow movement of #3. [Here's a [playlist](#) that lets you try it out.]

My goal here, however, is to combine the first movements of these three concerti into one (sort of) seamless movement. The biggest trick is that they are each in different keys: G, D, and A. At least they're closely related keys, so without getting into too much theory mumbo-jumbo, there are plenty of ways to get from one concerto to another. In fact, that's the way I like to think of it, as if each piece has a series of little portals through which a violinist can pop into a different world. [Insert Narnia and/or videogame analogies here.] I've sometimes wondered if violinists who play all three pieces ever find themselves accidentally tripping into the wrong universe.

If so, then maybe violinists shouldn't listen to what follows\*\*, but though it might seem that I'm making light of Mozart, the truth is that doing all this cutting and pasting has made me appreciate all the more how many beautifully crafted passages there are in these pages. It's certainly not my goal to improve on what Mozart has done - in fact, I decided pretty early on I'd rather explore as many portals as

possible, at the risk of leaving some ugly seams showing. Not only is it tricky to merge separate recordings into one (though the tempi in these performances by violinist/conductor René Köhler are close enough not to be a problem), but there are all sorts of considerations of harmonic motion, phrase structure, orchestration, overall structure, etc.

So, what we have here is a bit of a Frankenstein's monster - if you know the pieces well, you may find it jarring it at times; and even if you don't know them well, there are a few comically awkward moments. But, of course, those moments are some of my favorites. (Yes, I've also found myself thinking about a more multi-layered mashup, but let's save that for another day.) In all, there are more than fifty cuts, so given that, I think things hold together remarkably well. Here it is:

**Mozart: Violin Concerto No. 345** by **MMmusing**



I'll probably want to create a YouTube version at some point [UPDATE: **done!**] that will reveal where all the splices happen, but for now you're on your own...which is kind of the point.

---

\* A case might be made that the *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin and viola is Mozart's greatest violin concerto - and, no, that's not a **viola joke**.

\*\* For the record, my lovely violinist daughter has taken a great interest in this project (whereas she usually thinks I've lost my mind when I'm using up good computer time mangling music). At this point, she's only studied the G Major concerto, but she's genuinely interested in playing a performing version of my little monster. Having kids is the best!

P.S. Obviously, this kind of project could be tried out on all sorts of genres - Mozart piano concerti, Vivaldi violin concerti, Beethoven symphonies, Schoenberg piano pieces, etc. But, I think there's something particularly satisfying about this little set. Three is a nice, manageable number, and as I've said above, these pieces really do live almost interchangeably in the violin world. So there's something natural about exploring ways in which they're connected.

THURSDAY, JUNE 23, 2011

## *Atonality on Ice*

Last weekend, the Boston Bruins had a big parade to celebrate their first Stanley Cup since 1972. Although I've always been a big sports fan, I grew up in a part of the country where no one played or talked about hockey, so aside from the unforgettable **winter of 1980**, I've rarely spent much time caring about it. Still, I ended up watching a lot of playoff hockey this year, what with all the local Bruins mania, and I did enjoy it. Here's a **Twitter post from April of 2010** that kind of sums up my feelings about watching ice hockey:

Watching hockey to me is like listening to really wild atonal music. The gestures/speed can be exciting, but I have no idea what's going on.

I've actually used variations on this line a couple of other times on Twitter and even in conversation at parties (see, you should invite me to *your* party). Actually, I just did a quick search of my Twitter archive and discovered that the atonal/hockey connection started back in 2009. A pianist and hockey fan named @mariocast **tweeted** during a playoff game:

"Carter SCORES!!! Flyers 1, Penguins 0,"

to which I cleverly **replied**,

"and you can purchase Carter SCORES here: **<http://bit.ly/xl7Vx>**."

He **responded**,

"uh...thanks for the link. I do dig some of Elliot Carter's music, but I was talking about a hockey game."

And that prompted my **epiphanic observation**:

"to me, watching hockey is kind of like listening to E. Carter. It's fast-paced and exciting, but I'm never sure what's going on."

There now, wasn't that an interesting little historical journey? And it proves that Twitter can inspire interesting insights, because I think there's actually something to this idea. For me, the basic atonality/hockey connection has to do with the perceptive framework each imposes on its audience (or, at least, on me). Hockey moves at such a lightning pace, with possession of the puck constantly shifting from team to team, scoring opportunities always a second or two away, yet rarely being fulfilled - as one is watching, it's hard to process everything that's going on, partly because the action is so continuous. Aside from a few timeouts per period and the occasional power play (when a penalty means one team has to skate with fewer players for a couple of minutes), it's challenging to organize the events of a game in a clear way.

In the same way, atonal music (though not always fast) tends not to feature the kinds of cadences, resolutions and general harmonic contexts that help the listener organize the musical events as they go by. This doesn't mean that one can't make sense of the events: die-hard hockey fans can find much more structure and intent than I can in what often looks like random darting around the rink. The

announcers will often speak of set "plays" that I can sort of make sense of on replay - much as the theorist might be able to show me row statements and transformations. But the likes of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky will use clear phrasing/harmonic clues to group the pitches of a melody distinctly, just as a baseball game clearly separates into distinct plays (almost always initiated by a pitch!).

In fact, based on my own culturally conditioned perceptive framework, I'm going to suggest that taking in a baseball game reminds me the most of 18th-century music (especially the Classical style of Haydn and Mozart): there can be tremendous passion, heart-rending surprises, etc., but usually within a neatly structured series of events. Carrying this not-too-serious kind of comparison along, football has more of a 19th-century Romantic kind of feel - the emotions of the game are more heart-on-sleeve, there's more obvious drama and violence, but the game still organizes into very clear "plays." Romantic music, for all its energy and revolutionary fervor, is often even squarer and more predictable in its phrasing structures than music of the Classical Era (see Kyle Gann on Dvorak [here](#)), and football also has a very regular pattern of stopping and starting.

Basketball moves along much more continuously than baseball or football, but unlike hockey, the game is pretty clearly defined by which team possesses the ball at a given time. So, in terms of organizing one's perceptions, the game still falls into clear, if irregular, chunks, helped along by the fact that regular scoring also helps to structure one's viewing. So, I'm going to align the helter-skelter but mostly easily processed pacing of basketball with the early modernists like Stravinsky, Bartok, Shostakovich, and Prokofiev. (I know, that's a very Russian list.) Their music is often asymmetrical and unpredictable (lots of sudden fast breaks), but melodies and phrases are still pretty easy to discern. There's usually something to hang on to. [The rules are often a bit of a mystery in each case as well.]

And then there's hockey and the atonal gang. It's true that one of the most important distinctions here is that hockey and atonality are simply less popular and well-understood than baseball, football, and tonal music. Some people will always love them partly because of the outsider-y status, but hockey suffers from a world in which the average sports fan doesn't really understand its strategies or know how to follow the puck, and Schoenberg's fans are still waiting for the day when children whistle 12-tone tunes in the street.

Of course, when the stakes are high, the non-stop, "anything could happen any time" feel of a hockey game is an asset - again, I'm not even a big fan of the game, but I found myself almost breathless watching the Bruins playoff games, especially the Game 7s (they had 3!) and the overtimes. There's almost no way of knowing or guessing when the big moment is coming, which can be tremendously exciting, but the game still strikes me as less artless than baseball/football/basketball because so many of the "plays" don't work out.

Passes are routinely missed, shots are often blocked in ugly fashion as the puck bangs into a series of legs and sticks that are running interference. And, perhaps my biggest complaint, often the goals that are scored are not that aesthetically pleasing. Yes, careful player positioning and a skilled shot may set things in motion, but more than not, the actual goal seems to come from a rebound that's hard to see and that seems a product of chance as much as skill - just as so much atonal music ends up sounding kind of like chance music.

Which reminds me of another similarity between the worlds of atonality and hockey. Each embraces ugliness with a curious sort of pride. I don't know if it's because men on skates are afraid of being seen as un-masculine, but hockey has evolved into a brutal sport that features not only lots of violent hits, but even looks approvingly on fighting as part of the game.\* I'm still trying to come to terms with the fact that the Bruins' breakout star was rookie Brad Marchand, who's been referred to as a "little ball of hate." In one memorable "break in the action" from Game 6, Marchand punched Vancouver's highly skilled Swedish star Daniel Sedin in the face seven times in a row, for no other reason than he felt like it; although I'm sure Vancouver fans didn't like it, the mainline opinion on this goofy scene is that Marchand proved himself a tough warrior and Sedin, by trying to get a penalty called rather than punching back, was soft.



Atonal music is likewise full of brutal sounding sonorities that can feel like assaults on our civilized sensibilities



- and, again, it can seem like a sign of weakness to admit to not liking these sounds, at least in some circles. Ironically, many hockey players turn out to be surprisingly mild-mannered and good-natured off the ice - kind of like Milton Babbitt and his love for musical theater. Kind of.

But, to wrap up, I think the biggest similarity is that whole goal thing. There aren't many goals in a typical hockey game and it's hard to hear where the goals are in a typical atonal work.\*\* That doesn't mean there's not a lot of purposeful action in either - I listened to the Schoenberg *Piano Concerto* for the first time in a long time last week, and was surprised by some of the gorgeous orchestral sonorities that floated by early on, almost like refugees from a lush bit of Gershwin. I know it's not fair to hear the music that way, but I'm just being honest about my own perceptive framework, which is the point

of this whole post. I keep wanting these sounds to organize into a clearer harmonic framework, just as I long for a hockey possession to look organized and intentional for more than 6 seconds. But maybe it's just me...

---

\* I realize football is also ridiculously violent, but somehow its violence is more aesthetically pleasing to me - maybe because I grew up watching it, but maybe because hockey has those big ugly sticks waving around and that brutally hard, cold surface. At least football players get to land on soft turf and they don't get slammed into walls.

\*\* What about the lack of goals in soccer, you say? Yes, that's a problem for us unenlightened Americans, but soccer doesn't have the wild, ugly side of hockey, so I'm going to align soccer with the world of Renaissance counterpoint. Lots of beautiful, controlled play that seems endless in its purposelessly purposeful flow. (I actually like Renaissance counterpoint much more than soccer, but will admit I've never given soccer much of a chance.)

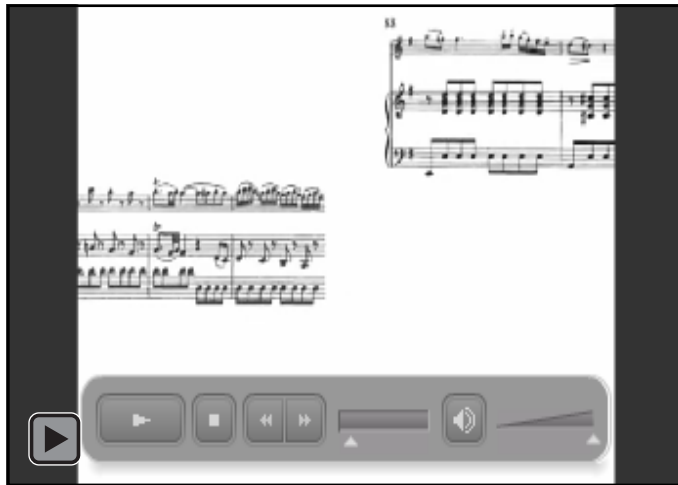
[This is perhaps the least timely post I've ever written. I actually started thinking about writing it on June 15, the day of Game 7 in the Stanley Cup playoffs - then I wrote a good bit of it last Saturday, the day Boston celebrated the Bruins with a big parade. And here it is, more than a week past hockey season and officially a summer hockey column. Oh well.]



SUNDAY, JUNE 26, 2011

## *Mozart Mashup Decoded*

I've been meaning to write a more substantial post about this video version of my **Mozart violin concerto mashup**, but in the meantime, for those who don't follow my **Twitter feed**, here it is:



I think it does a pretty good job of showing how this hybrid concerto (can a hybrid have more than two sources?) weaves back and forth among Mozart's three concerti. I do wish I'd used higher quality score images to begin with - the video's a little jumpy at times; but, the basic idea is that material from the 3rd concerto always appears on the top level, material from the 4th appears in the middle, and material from the 5th appears on the bottom. You may notice that #4 in D Major (which has 2 sharps) is often the gateway between #3 and #5, since #3 is in G Major (1 sharp) and #5 is in A Major (3 sharps).

And perhaps some day I'll write more about it, particularly about my favorite moments...

[If you missed the **original blog post**, the basic idea is explained there.]

TUESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2011

*My Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring*

To end my summer blogging hiatus as summer nears its end, I'm finally getting around to recording and uploading an arrangement I made at the end of the spring.

I'm planning to write a good bit more about this piece in the weeks ahead, but for now I'll just say that it was written in honor of **Judson and Janice Carlberg**, the recently retired president and first lady of Gordon College. The Carlbergs were wonderful leaders of our school for the past nineteen years, and they also happened to be enthusiastic supporters of our **Piano Hero** recital series. Although Piano Hero was on hiatus this past year, we presented a special year-end recital in honor of the Carlbergs on May 23. A couple of days before the recital (which featured fan favorites such as the overtures to *Candide* and *1812*), I had the idea of arranging the college hymn for our two-piano context.

Gordon's college hymn is the classic "**My Jesus, I Love Thee**," its tune having been composed by A.J. Gordon, the college's founding father. The **melody** is quite simple in shape and structure,



and as I thought about it, Bach's famous "**Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring**" came to mind. Bach's flowing triplets are anything but simple, but they were designed by Bach to accompany another very simple **hymn tune**, so I figured I might as well steal from the best.

Bach's triplets are re-imagined to some degree because this new arrangement is in duple meter, whereas Bach's is in triple time. I originally tried switching Gordon's hymn into triple time, but because it has such a simple melodic profile, it tended to get lost that way. (Actually, the hymn tune Bach borrowed was originally in duple meter; you can see many versions of the tune [here](#).) Stretching Bach's triplets from 9 to 12 per measure turned out to be a fun challenge, but I think it works, both as an extension of Bach's idea and as an accompaniment to Gordon's tune.

Although I was pleased with the two-piano version, I decided to record it here with violin and piano so that the tune floats clearly above the counterpoint. (Also, I forgot to hit the record button at the premiere!) The recording itself is an unedited take from an hour or so spent in the recital hall this

afternoon with my "house violinist" - having a daughter learning to play the violin is really starting to pay off! She was quite patient as I faked my way through a hybrid piano part I patched together from the two-piano score.\* Some day I'll try to make a more polished version, but I think this captures the spirit of the arrangement pretty well.



**My Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring** by **MMmusing**

---

\* Actually, the day before the May 23 Piano Hero recital, I was at church early in the morning preparing to play the 10am service. I didn't have a prelude picked out yet, I needed something in G Major, and it occurred to me that the then arrangement-in-progress would work nicely with violin. So, I called home and asked my wife to bring our house violinist along early with fiddle in hand; then, I whipped out the laptop and tossed together a very quick violin/piano version which we premiered an hour or so later. She's a pretty cool customer. (She wasn't thrilled about being asked to play on the spot, but not having to practice much seemed to make up for it. Growing up as Daughter of MMmusing is going to be an interesting experience.)

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2011

## *Fun with the First Figaro Finale*

[I'm very good at burying the lede, so if you don't feel like reading all this, then just jump down to the **video** at the bottom, or go straight to my new **integrated score/video** for this Figaro finale.]

There's probably no musical excerpt I've taught more than the Act II Finale of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. I have been using it regularly in three different classes (music history, a music appreciation type class, and a big general arts lecture class) going back many years, and I've accompanied it in opera scenes performances two different times; so if nothing else, I've gotten to know these twenty minutes pretty well. The fact that the finale is twenty minutes long is a big part of why I choose to teach it. Teaching opera in excerpts is always frustrating because the best operas (and certainly Mozart's operas) are so cumulative in impact. (Yes, that's true of some symphonic works, but I find it more satisfying to teach a movement of a symphony than an just aria or two from an opera.)

Certainly, there are plenty of Mozart arias that are worth using as introduction to Mozart's style, but it's the ensembles and the way in which he builds momentum over a lengthy scene that interest me the most - and there's nothing quite like this finale. (The Act IV finale is extraordinary as well.) Peter Shaffer makes a big deal about it in *Amadeus*, giving Mozart this wonderful speech extolling the virtues of the opera ensemble:

That's why opera is important, Baron. Because it's realer than any play! A dramatic poet would have to put all those thoughts down one after another to represent this second of time. The composer can put them all down at once - and still make us hear each one of them. Astonishing device - a vocal quartet! [More and More excited] I tell you I want to write a finale lasting half an hour! A quartet becoming a quintet becoming a sextet becoming a septet. On and on, wider and wider - all sounds multiplying and rising together - and then together making a sound entirely new . . . I bet you that's how God hears the world! Millions of sounds ascending at once and mixing in His ear to become an unending music, unimaginable to us!

Peter Hall, the original director of the stage version of *Amadeus*, has a terrific chapter on Mozart ensembles in his little book, *Exposed by the Mask*. He echoes Shaffer's Mozart's words here:

Only opera can exploit the paradox that we all have different responses to the same situation, even when we are saying the same words. And for us - the audience - it is a moment of complete chaos made clear. The music gives it form and meaning. (p.87)

Of course, the length of this finale is a challenge from a teaching perspective. On the one hand, it's not hard to have a big success just showing a video, because it's very entertaining theater\* - certainly more entertaining than listening to me rattle on and on. On the other hand, it's easy for the students not to think much about the music at all. That doesn't mean the music isn't a big part of what makes the scene entertaining - but there's a lot to be learned by investigating both the finer details and, most importantly, the large-scale structural principles.

Several of my recent blog posts have been about hearing/seeing/experiencing a large work in "big picture" format. I love dfan's **comment** from one of those posts:

I remember as a little kid when I suddenly realized that I actually could hold the whole structure of the first movement of Beethoven's 5th in my head and follow it from beginning to end, and that it actually made logical semantic sense in the same way that a long sentence does, rather than just being a continuous stream of arbitrary music that happened to end at some point.

Back in the darker ages, before YouTube had become so useful, I created for students a Quicktime file with the audio for the finale and a series of captions that describe the gist of what's going on, with prompts to listen for various musical details. The over-riding structural principle for the finale is quite easy to grasp: the way in which the characters are systematically added to the stage, building from duet to septet. "*A quartet becoming a quintet becoming a sextet becoming a septet....*" In fact, although this finale is often celebrated as twenty minutes of continuous music, each of the five big sections (Duet; Trio; Quartet; Quintet; Septet) could stand alone pretty well as a musical number. It's noteworthy that Mozart moves the plot along without using the more conventional recitative style for these twenty minutes, but it's also not exactly true that the plot moves forward continuously. In fact, as Peter Hall suggests, there are moments throughout the finale when the characters turn to the audience (at least figuratively) to confide their inner thoughts, the special point being that we get to perceive multiple sets of thoughts all at once.

Aside from pointing out the obvious about characters being added to the stage, I also like to emphasize the pacing choices Mozart makes. Most important is the way in which he uses an old-fashioned courtly dance style at three crucial junctures in the finale. A lot of the dramatic tension in this finale comes from the back and forth as to who has the upper hand; sometimes it's the Count, sometimes it's the Countess, Susanna, or Figaro. Though most of the music is fast-paced, and even frenetic, each of these dance episodes is used to slow things down as we watch the characters sizing each other up. The courtly dance style works well for this, combining a surface formality with barely concealed emotions simmering away beneath. It's easy to think of dozens of powdered wig period films in which dance scenes are used to the same effect. There's a broader analogy to what Mozart accomplishes with his operas in general, because he generally relies on fairly standard musical styles that can appear merely polished and elegant on the surface, but which can reveal amazing depths of human feeling.

I can still remember a time when I tried to teach this scene from the piano with a fat piano-vocal score that never stayed open; I'd suddenly think about a moment 35 pages down the road and awkwardly flip my way around, then jump over to the podium to see how quickly I could zero in on the right spot in the VHS or DVD. Fun, but crazy and frustrating. I've been using PDF scores in class almost exclusively for years now, but it still can be a challenge to get around efficiently in the score, on the iPod, and on the DVD.

Although I'm pretty good at flipping from window to window on the laptop, I knew there had to be an easier way. Thus began a week-long journey, with some lessons in html, Acrobat, Quicktime, and javascript (!) along the way. I won't go into all the techy detail (although I will admit both that I love fiddling with code, and that I have almost no training in doing so), but I finally managed a solution that works very well in the classroom. I'm still struggling to make this something that can be easily shared online, due to differences in web browsers, screen sizes, and various compatibility issues, but I've decided to post what I've got so far.

The beauty of this system (which I hope to employ with many other long pieces) is that one can, with one click, jump right to the same place in the score and the embedded video. I have found this to be wonderfully freeing in the lecture setting. I'm sure there must be easier ways to do all this, and I'd love to learn flash or HTML5 to that end, but this is a start.

To try it out, click [here](#). For best results, you'll then want to go fullscreen (use F11 in Windows) and then reload the page (usually F5 or Ctrl-R works) in fullscreen mode to size the score optimally. (Hit F11 again to exit fullscreen mode.) If the commands aren't working, you may need to click in the white space around the movie window so that the commands go to the browser and not the score or movie. Finally, you'll almost certainly need to wait a few minutes before the movie fully loads. You'll probably also need to approve the use of a javascript-embedded file (you may get a warning about potentially dangerous content - I promise I'm not out to get you!) and you'll need Quicktime installed. (See, it's killing me that there are all these little disclaimers; but once these things are set, it should work beautifully.)

[Here's](#) a good 'ol YouTube video that shows you sort of how it should work. You should watch the YouTube video fullscreen, ideally in HD.

The main features:

**Easy-to-use score.** Just click on the left or right margins to turn the pages backwards or forwards. (At this point, the pages don't actually turn as the video plays, but the bookmarks will take you to the right places.)

**Embedded video.** This is a nice Met, all-star production with Fleming, Terfel, Bartoli, et al. It has useful subtitles as well. I just pulled it off of YouTube; there are a variety of little glitches along the way, including one spot where about half a page of music gets skipped. However, I don't want this project to be about getting lost in a great video; the video is there to help the user see the stage context and follow a rough translation. If you want to watch the opera, go watch the opera! (There are worse ways to spend your time...)

**Page numbers marked in the video.** If you look in the bottom right corner of the video window, you'll see a little box that shows the current page number, so if you get lost, you can always pause and flip to the correct page.

**"What to listen for" captions playing beneath the video.** These are just the old captions I made years ago, slightly updated and re-timed for this video.

Again, the main point is that all these items are linked, so it's really easy to jump round and explore the score. If you're interested, the three "dance episodes" to which I referred are:

beginning of the **Trio**, when Susanna emerges from the closet, to the confusion of the Count and Countess.

**Interrogation #1** in the Quartet, when the Count asks Figaro about the mysterious letter he received.

**Interrogation #2** in the Quintet, when the Count asks Figaro about the papers left behind by the mystery man who jumped out the window.

[[Here's a synopsis of the opera](#) if you need to get up to speed.]

The rest I leave to your own exploration. This obviously won't work so well on small screens or smartphones. I don't know if it's iPad-ready or not. If you're interested in downloadable files that wouldn't have to load over the Internet on your computer, feel free to email me about that.

Of course, there are many music textbooks now that come with guided listening programs, some of them pretty good. But it's gratifying to integrate score, video, subtitles, and captions this way, and to know that I can do it with other scores. And, to be honest, it was just a fun, geeky thing to do. Hope you find it useful. Mozart's the best!

---

\* For the record, the video I like to show in class is the [Peter Sellars "Trump Towers" version](#). In spite of Sellars' reputation for being outrageous, I find that this production takes the characters more seriously than many others and makes the emotions feel genuine and even unsettling. I also don't think anyone will ever sing Figaro more beautifully than Sanford Sylvan.



FRIDAY, MARCH 9, 2012

## Ballade Blogging

[Series Archive](#)

I'm on Spring Break and have decided to set myself the leisure-time goal of re-learning Chopin's *Ballade No. 4 in F Minor*, a piece I last played (as far as I can recall) on my undergraduate Junior Piano Recital. Technically speaking, that's more than two decades ago (!). For much of those two-plus decades, my life as a pianist has been more focused on collaboration, but every now and then I remember that playing solo piano rep is how I got into this whole mess in the first place. It's still my first love, and as much as I adore duo sonatas, concerto accompaniments, art songs, opera scenes, and *not* having to play from memory, there's nothing quite like having the whole thing to yourself and actually knowing the whole thing by heart.

To be totally honest, as age (and too much time online?) seems to diminish my ability to remember phone numbers, passwords, how to spell words, and what to call my children, I also welcome the opportunity to exercise my musical memory muscles. Perhaps that will sharpen the 'ol think system, and maybe I'll even re-capture some of my youth along the way. The truth is, my fingers didn't really remember much of the ballade, having let it sit on the shelf for so long, but it's amazing how starting into it almost immediately put me back in time.

I've given two solo piano recital in the past ten years, and in each case, when it came to choosing repertoire, I found myself inexorably drawn to music I'd played before - not because it gave me a useful head start (I forget pieces really well), but because I feel such connection to music I've played. If my musical life was regularly devoted to solo repertoire, I hope I'd be more adventurous about choosing something new to me, but for now, there's just nothing I'd rather play than...well, the Chopin F Minor ballade.

Actually, I chose it kind of accidentally. On Tuesday, I read a Max Levinson blog [post](#) that samples various recordings of the first Chopin etude, a piece I'd heard on the radio earlier that day. I'd worked on it off and on years ago and had decided to let the coincidence of encountering it twice in a day inspire me to learn it for real. Well, turns out my preferred copy of the Chopin etudes was missing from my shelf, so I pulled out the ballades instead, almost by accident. A few minutes later, I was playing these magical opening bars:



And off we go! Even three days in, it's been infinitely rewarding to revisit these pages, and it's also given me lots to think about. Thus, my grandiose plan is to blog about the ballade each day for the next week\* - if all goes really well, I might even try to record it at the end of the week, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. If this project manages to get me blogging again and gives me a chance to live with this music every day, that will be something. Maybe I'll even be able to remember my phone number...

---

\* This idea is partly inspired by Jeremy Denk's wonderful 7-day series on a Bach allemande. [Start [here](#).]

SATURDAY, MARCH 10, 2012

*Ballade Blogging, Part 2: Sublimation and the Sublime*

## Series Archive



I finally saw *The Tree of Life* two nights ago and found it an overpowering experience - enough so that I watched it again last night. I'm not particularly interested in the kind of analysis and puzzle-solving that seems to attend most discussions of this film. (I'm also no cinephile, so I don't know enough about Terrence Malick or his place in cinema history to make informed comparisons to other such films - if there are any other such films!) For me, watching it was about as close as I can imagine to experiencing a film like I would a symphony or other mostly abstract musical form, and my desire to see it again right away was mostly about getting back into the world it summons.

Of course, *The Tree of Life* is full of music, mostly music familiar to me from the classical tradition, and its screenplay has fewer words than the average opera, so in some respects it plays like a big concert with stunning visuals, but I think the "music" of the visuals is what affected me the most. By "music of the visuals," I mean that the succession of images was compelling in the same way the succession of notes in a symphony is compelling - not because they tell me a story, but because they are fully engaging in their own right. But I'm not really prepared to offer much detail about why Malick's visions affected me this way.\*

On the other hand, I'm always ready to talk about music - in this case, not so much the **bits** of Mahler, Smetana, Respighi, Gorecki, Tavener, etc. that serve as soundtrack (though the question of using such music in fragments is worth exploring another day), but the music dear to Mr. O'Brien (played by Brad Pitt), the severe, disillusioned father in the "story." There may not be a lot of conventional plot in *The Tree of Life*, but we learn a lot about Mr. O'Brien through his relationship to music. Maybe I should be insulted that this cold, sometimes cruel man is most at peace when playing Mozart at the piano, Bach at the organ, or Brahms on the record player, but I think it exposes some important truths about how classical music so often functions.

Yes, these scenes are intended on some level to remind us that Mr. O'Brien, who has a pedestrian job in some sort of factory, never fulfilled his own dream of becoming a great musician, so there's some nostalgia and regret mixed in - and music happens to be a wonderful vehicle for indulging in nostalgia and regret - but we also see that this man who has trouble with human connections can find great pleasure when lost in music. We see this as he's playing the Bach *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*, and his son Jack sits nearby, possibly to turn pages, maybe just to listen, but essentially just looking at the organist, perhaps wondering why his father can't connect with him the way he does with a keyboard. In another scene, just as Mrs. O'Brien has started bragging about a success Jack had in school, the father cuts her off to point out a particularly thrilling passage from the finale of Brahms' fourth symphony that's been playing on the stereo as dinner music. We also see Mr. O'Brien in a happier moment connecting with the more sensitive middle son who's trying to work out Couperin's *Mysterious barricades* on the guitar in imitation of his father's piano playing.

Now, I'm not saying all "classical music" is the same (it's a pretty big umbrella), but a **Bach fugue**, a Brahms' **symphonic movement in the form of a chaconne**, and Couperin's **intricately textured chains of suspensions** all represent music at its most structured - they provide a nice cool surface under and through which powerful emotions can be contained and released. It could be tempting to see this as a negative portrayal of classical music - if the father really has genuine emotions, shouldn't he be wailing away at the blues or at least singing opera? But the classical music experience is often about exploring tremendous depths of feeling in a carefully structured way. I must have **written** this about *The Rite of Spring* at least a dozen times, the fact that we usually experience its primitive wildness via a highly trained and rigorously coordinated group of musicians in formal dress.

It sometimes seems that classical music types want to run from this stereotype as much as possible. *"No, we're not repressed; our music was written and is performed by vibrant people about everyday feelings and emotions. People didn't always sit quietly and reverently while listening to Mozart; that's just a modern affectation. Please don't think we're repressed!"* Well, OK, maybe "repressed" is a little strong (maybe?), but there is a kind of sublimation that's often going on, even if only because so much discipline, patience and control is needed to execute the notes. The words sublime and sublimation are awfully close, after all.

Sir Peter Hall, the great stage director, has written a wonderful little book, *Exposed by the Mask*, in which he explores the idea that the forms of theatre are what give it such communicative power, whether it's the literal masks of the Greeks, the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare, or the operatic conventions of Mozart. Hall writes:

I am therefore led to believe that performance always has to have the equivalent of a mask in order to transmit an emotion. It must have a mask, even if it is not a literal mask. (p. 25)

and:

Any defined form in the theatre performs as a mask: it releases rather than hides; it enables emotion to be specific rather than generalised. It permits control while it prevents indulgence. Form frees, it does not inhibit. (p. 26)

It's probably not coincidental that this praise for well-tempered artificiality in art comes from a very proper Englishman. Hall even suggests that it's always more powerful to see an actor hold back tears than to have them poured out on the audience, but if that sounds like a "stiff upper lip" attitude that would logically appeal to Mr. O'Brien, it hardly means such power is only available to the repressed. By the way, there are a lot of classical musicians who are pretty shy and introverted; I know because I am one. We may not feel comfortable smashing guitars or weeping openly with Adele-like vocals, but music can still serve to get at something deep inside.



So, finally I come to Chopin's fourth and final ballade, the piece I'm learning and **blogging** about this week. As with *The Tree of Life* and its many mysteries, you'll find plenty of people who want to interpret the Chopin ballades to unearth the possible stories that might explain them, but the music connects at a much more visceral, indefinable level; and the F Minor ballade represents, for me, the pinnacle of Chopin's achievement in marrying elegant

sophistication of form with unbridled freedom of expression - a marriage which, of course, should be impossible. It's only about ten minutes, but it's also somehow about everything: memory, longing, sorrow, hope, soaring passion and violent desolation. That's why pianists will pour so much hard work into untangling the formal intricacies - in hopes of getting at what's inside. Inside the music and inside of us.

I don't know how repressed Chopin actually was as a person, but I'm probably biased by the amusing, poignant portrait Hugh Grant provides in *Impromptu*. In [this excerpt](#), Chopin thinks he's alone, playing his first ballade, but it turns out Georges Sand is hiding under the piano. When things are interrupted prematurely [you can skip ahead to 1:50 if you like], we see that she fully gets what his music is getting at, while he is shocked at the brazen invasion of his privacy. He's actually more comfortable lost in his own music, but she makes a completely human connection via that same music.

Later in the film, he confesses to her:

You must think I'm inexperienced, but I assure you, I was baptized... in the brothels of Paris, when I first arrived. But, um... I'm so ill... and I have been for such a long time, and my body is such a great disappointment to me, that I've already said goodbye to it, I'm... not really \*in it\* any more, I'm just... happier floating about in music. And if I should come back... inside this miserable collection of bones, then I... am afraid that it would probably collapse altogether. Forgive me. I'm ashamed.

Perhaps an exaggerated conception of what the turbucular Chopin came to think of himself, but maybe it says something about what music did for him. This might seem to be another argument for thinking that classical music is about "repression," but I want to suggest that a broad range of people (including the thoroughly unrepressed Mme. Sand) can find essential connections in music that masks itself in elegance and gentility.

At the end of *The Tree of Life* [this is sort of a SPOILER, although I can't really explain what I'm spoiling], in the midst of images that suggest an end of human suffering and misery, we see a *commedia* mask sinking into the ocean. There is certainly the suggestion that a time will come when Mr. O'Brien and others are no longer trapped within themselves, hidden behind masks; but maybe we should be glad that, while trapped in this life, the best music has the possibility of reaching those who aren't so easily reached.

\* As it happens, this is actually the first movie I've ever watched at home on Blu-ray, so the stunning visuals might have affected me even more since I'd never really seen a TV do anything like this. (We've had an HD TV for about six months; up until now, I'd mostly been impressed by what it does for football.) I do think the fact that Malick's camera is in motion so often has something to do with me seeing "music" in the visual language. The only other film that's really struck me this way is Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, which is possibly my favorite film ever, and which also has a very restless camera (and which also uses music wonderfully, but that's a story for another day).

*Magnolia* clocks in at more than three hours, and yet time always flies by (or disappears) when I'm watching it. I wouldn't quite say that time flies when watching *The Tree of Life*. Of course, *Magnolia* has MUCH more plot than *The Tree of Life*, and it's filled with dialogue. The scarcity of dialogue in *The Tree of Life* is surely one reason the visual dimension comes into focus so much. Let's face it, once words start buzzing around, they tend to distract us from the important things.

TUESDAY, MARCH 13, 2012

### *Ballade Blogging, Part 5: Right and Wrong*

My son (almost five) has only recently taken an interest in our Wii video-game system. He especially loves playing *Mario and Sonic at the Winter Olympics*, even though he knows next-to-nothing about winter sports, and, since his reading skills are quite primitive, he navigates the various menus and instructions with the same level of comprehension that I'd exhibit playing video cricket in India. In other words, he really has almost no idea what he's doing, but that doesn't stop him from running up excitedly to tell me he's just opened "**Dream Curling**" on his account - meaning he somehow did well enough in regular curling to earn this gift from the Wii gods.

Frankly, I don't understand how regular curling works (brooms?), and I certainly don't know what's going on in this fantasy version - so, I can assure you that Son of MMmusing has, at best, only an intuitive/imaginative interpretation of what's happening on screen, but he has the time of his life shaking the controller, pushing buttons semi-randomly, and somehow doing OK. My point is that there are a lot of ways to comprehend an experience aside from the "right way." Clearly, the Nintendo folks have set their games up to be easily playable and even winnable (on the Easy levels), so that the barrier to having a good time isn't so high.

The various ways in which people might listen to and comprehend music are even more varied since, when you listen, you don't even have to push buttons or shake a controller to "win" - although people sometimes choose to shake things. I don't just mean that some will hear a "storm" where others hear "anger" or "my mother." I mean the way in which our minds organize the sounds (parallel to the way my son's mind organizes curling events) are open to all sorts of possibilities, many of which might be seen as "wrong," but interesting and pleasurable nevertheless.

Sometimes, I find that looking back through my own musical life is like looking through geological layers defined by what I understood at a given time. For example, this little Schumann march:



I realize now that, as a young piano student, I heard that dotted figure as an upbeat, so that beat 2 of the first measure becomes the downbeat. In fact, it becomes kind of a diverting way to hear this piece; because Schumann's cadences resolve on beat 2 (m.4, m.8, m.12, etc.), it makes perfect musical sense to re-organize the notes in my youthful way, with cadences on downbeats. (Cadences like downbeats.) The only problem is that, in the original version, the final phrase ends not on 2 but on a downbeat, providing a nice sense of closure. So, if you play it all as I used to hear it, it pretty much works until...the final cadence comes early, landing with a comical thud on the 2nd beat. (Well, I think it's funny.)



Not such a big deal - maybe Schumann even intended this to be ambiguous, but the current "me" would never look at that first version and think of stressing the second beats, because the notation clearly indicates otherwise. Back in the day, though, I had much less concept of what a given meter implied about stresses, and I can remember being confused by the ending. I could easily drag up many other examples of pieces I used to hear differently than intended. (I have a vague memory of trying to work out this **6/8 Schumann piece** in 3 beats per bar. Wild Rider, indeed - might have even inspired **this**.) In some cases, the mis-hearing actually provides a sense of freedom, not to be so constrained by a meter.

In high school, I learned Debussy's colorful showpiece *L'isle joyeuse*. My fingers could handle it fine, but I was reading through it the other day and remembering that a passage like this left me completely befuddled rhythmically.

[see example of next page]





What happens in the third bar isn't really all that complicated - the music is in 4, but the sextuplets group melodically into six sets (as shown by the upward facing brackets), so there's a delightful cross-rhythm. Yet what I remember is a feeling of total freedom in that measure - I could sense (probably from listening to Horowitz's recording a thousand times) that something had "happened" to the pulse, but since I couldn't process it, it became a wonderful invitation to just let those bell-like notes toll away. Because I was doing my best to copy Horowitz, I'd guess my tempo wasn't so far off, but I can still almost feel the sensation I had then of free floating. I kind of miss that.

Probably the most famous music that people often hear "wrong" is the opening motif of Beethoven's 5th symphony. Everyone knows it's three shorts and a long ("V" in Morse Code), but it's quite common for people to think of the three shorts as a triplet, implying a slight stress on the first one, when in fact Beethoven wrote an 8th rest followed by three 8ths that lead into the downbeat. Should be " ---buh-buh-buh-BUH," not "Duh-duh-duh-DUH." (The latter rhythmic pattern is featured in the **3rd movement**.)



So far I've just shown examples of distorted metrical perception, but shortly after I started **relearning** Chopin's 4th ballade, I remembered that he notates the main tune (which I referred to as lonely and "searching" in the previous **post**) differently than I tend to hear it. I'm fairly certain my mis-hearing goes back well more than twenty years, before I'd ever looked at the score. You can see below 1) Chopin's notation, and 2) my own conception:

[see example on next page]

The image displays two musical staves, labeled #1 and #2, representing different interpretations of a melodic line. Both staves are in treble clef and feature a piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The tempo is marked 'a tempo' and the dynamics are 'mezza voce'. A red box highlights a specific melodic phrase in both staves. Below each staff is a video player interface with a play button and a progress bar.

When I say it's my own conception, I don't mean that I want to argue with Chopin about it or that I think he made a mistake. It's just that, on a more subconscious level, if you asked me to sing the tune (and I hadn't spent all this time thinking about it), I'm sure that version #2 is what would come to mind.

I wondered if this was a common hearing, so I polled my Twitter followers and actually got six replies (from NYC, Virginia, Arizona, LA, the UK, and Australia!) and they all voted against me! Even more curiously, I asked my wife to sing the tune as she heard it, knowing that she only knew the piece through my practicing of it in the past week. She ALSO chose Chopin's version, so I guess it was seeping through in my own playing.

Again, it's important to note that I don't really disagree with Chopin. Probably the best way of looking at this tune is understanding both that the E-natural winds down to the B-flat and back up to the D-flat, and yet our ears also hear a slightly longer range connection from the E to the D-flat. Part of me wonders if Chopin avoided notating it this second way to steer clear of the melodic augmented 2nd, an interval that's frowned upon in counterpoint exercises.

Anyway, that's the connection I find myself most drawn to, which I think explains why I would naturally sing the tune my way. I understand that Chopin's disjunct melody (E-Bb-Db) has a lovely wandering/searching character, but to be really honest, I just find the second version to be more beautiful (not that mere beauty has to be the only goal), and I even think that lingering E-natural is part of what attracted me to the ballade in the first place, twenty-plus years ago. As I hope to discuss tomorrow, one of the great things about living with music is being able to connect with one's own past. Silly as it sounds, that E-Db is an important part of my past, or at least of my relationship to this ballade. And, sometimes (often) the "right" way isn't the only or even best way. (That's a topic for another day as well.)

By the way, hearing it "my way" also turns that poignant E-natural into an *appoggiatura* (could also be called an "accented passing tone" because it's approached from above); you **may recall** that the *appoggiatura* is the musical device credited by the *Wall Street Journal* with helping Adele make people cry. I don't know if I ever cried hearing this melody, but I'm sure it's given me chills. And, in an uncanny coincidence, the very same Son of MMmusing who opened this post was walking around the house today with an iPod, listening to his sister's Adele album. He probably understands her music about as much as he understands curling, but that's not stopping him from having a good time.

THURSDAY, MARCH 15, 2012

## *Ballade Blogging, Part 7: Self-reflection*

### Series Archive

Though I've spilled more than 6,000 words in the past week, I'll have to admit that this "ballade" series has focused only intermittently on Chopin's fourth and final ballade. I've stayed busy practicing it, but I guess I'm more interested in letting the music speak for itself when I get around to recording it - or not recording it. Certainly there are plenty of recordings out there to speak for it. What has interested me is thinking more broadly about the experience of connecting to a piece, in this case a piece I also played about twenty-five years ago.

So, even my specific musical examples have had less to do with musical/technical analysis and more with my relationship to the piece. For example: 1) **being genuinely surprised** (in a piece I know!) by the way Chopin subtly reprises a theme and 2) **finding tension** in the way I hear a theme vs. the way it's notated. I've also mused about the 3) vivid way in which a **musical re-encounter** can awaken very specific memories and even 4) about the degree to which Chopin's ballade **allows an introverted person** like me to enact something passionate and extroverted - though within 5) a **contained sort of context**.

One subject I haven't tackled: what's the point in investing so much energy to learn something that's been recorded dozens of times (and performed thousands of times) by more able pianists? To some degree, this question implies a critique of the whole "classical music" mindset - why do we keep going back to the same well? Furthermore, since I tend to define myself as a "collaborative pianist" and my professional life revolves mostly around being an accompanist, music director, and professor, it almost feels selfish to spend so much time on solo stuff. Shouldn't I be working with someone else and being part of something bigger?

There are plenty of easy surface answers to that question. I'm a professional pianist and I teach piano (sometimes), so I should work on challenging repertoire and keep up my memorization skills, etc. If I'm a better musician, I'll do all my other jobs better. There's the possibility that audiences will enjoy hearing me play it live. Playing great music that's been handed down through the ages IS being part of something bigger. But on some level, there is still something a little bit selfish about this, if only because I think I'll get more out of it than anyone else will.

A Chopin ballade is a public piece in some respects, but I'd argue that its greatest rewards are for the person playing - the three-way intersection of the remarkable musical ideas with the countless hours spent internalizing them and the sensual connection with the instrument itself. When I play through the insane coda and most of the notes fall into place, it's an extraordinary meeting of mind, body, and spirit. Fingers are sent on very specific missions [mind], they experience tremendous tension and power [body], and I feel as if I'm flailing about like a madman [spirit]. An argument could be made that the audience gets to enjoy it more since they don't have to worry about the technical stuff - but that's not my experience.

I suspect this is one of classical music's problems. We all say we're doing it for the common good, to bring great art to audiences, to make the world a better place, yada, yada, yada - and all of those might be true, don't get me wrong - but I think most of us do it first because it's just so rewarding. No

wonder we have so many students playing at absurdly high levels in the conservatories, even when there's no clear future ahead career-wise. The music and the instrument are incredibly compelling.

There've been times in the past few weeks when I could barely pull myself away from the keyboard. I wish I could say that happens more often in my daily musical life, but as I said in my [first post](#), the solo piano repertoire was my first musical love, and it's really gratifying to re-connect with that part of myself. I enjoy going to concerts and listening to my iPod and the radio (although I don't listen with the passion I did as an avid LP-collector in my formative years), but being at the piano is where my musical center is.

Here's a little confession that's slightly embarrassing. A lot of times with recordings, my most engaged listening happens when I'm imagining that I'm the one performing. I've listened to [this Richter recording](#) of the Prokofiev 1st Concerto about fifty times driving down various highways, and often I'm seeing myself at the keys. When I'm listening that way, I'm completely locked in. (Amazing that I haven't gotten a speeding ticket!) I've also found that just about every piece my violinist daughter studies suddenly becomes so much more interesting - at least until she's done with it. For example, I've never had much interest in the Wieniawski 2nd - but when it was on the daily playlist here at Chez MMmusing, it seemed the equal of the Brahms and Tchaikovsky concertos. I guess I'm saying something pretty obvious - that music works most deeply when it's personal.

Of course, "selfish" is kind of a loaded word - there's certainly nothing wrong with learning music for oneself, and there's no question that audiences have received countless gifts from performers who are motivated first by pure self-interest. Lots of stuff in life works that way. I don't really feel guilty about any of this - excerpt, perhaps, that I haven't practiced as much as I'd hoped...

So, here endeth this little series. I'd fantasized about posting my own recording today, but the truth is, there are a couple of pages not yet memorized, and I'll need some time to live with it even once the memory's done. It's a finger-twister! I was at first relieved to find that the ballade seemed easier to play than it did in college (one sometimes fears, at a certain age, that the technique will slip away), but I'm realizing that's partly because I can read and grasp complicated patterns much more readily than I once could, so getting started was a breeze.\* The refining part is still just as hard, though. Back to work!

---

\* It's also been kind of cool to see Malcolm Gladwell's ["10,000 Rule"](#) in action. I used to hate working in all those back-and-forth boom-chick patterns in Chopin's left-hand writing, but years of playing constantly (all those Schubert songs!) have made that seem effortless.

THURSDAY, JULY 5, 2012

*Now just a minute...*

Stephen Hough **mentions** in passing, while commenting about the general inanity of YouTube commenting, that Chopin's "Minute" Waltz should not (of course!) be shoehorned into a single minute. Although Hough certainly has the chops to hit the finish line in 60 seconds, he offers the fairly typical caution: "Oh, and Chopin never called the piece 'Minute Waltz' anyway, and it's impossible to play it in 60 seconds unless you crash brutally, meaninglessly through the central section." Well, maybe...

It actually raises a fairly interesting question about how we make aesthetic judgments; most of us have been told fairly regularly that *music* shouldn't just be about sport, and Chopin's gracefulness is so much more meaningful than empty displays of speed, and it's not really supposed to be a minute waltz, and the title was originally attached to the piece to suggest minuteness, as in tininess, not 60 seconds, etc. OK, I get all that, but still, I suspect that if I react negatively to a ridiculously fast performance of this piece, it's at least in part because I think I'm not *supposed* to like it that way.

Nevertheless, I couldn't help but think it strange that I'd never given this piece the "**Amphetpollini**" treatment it so logically deserves. It probably is true that no human could play this piece gracefully in a minute or less, but we're not livin' in the 19th century. Technology has made it ever so easy to upgrade all the elegant proportions of a fine **Joyce Hatto** performance into something just a bit quicker (hey, it's not as if recordings aren't already altered in many, many ways via editing magic), and so:



Well, I'm not ashamed to say I like it. I do think that much of Hatto's grace is preserved, and the middle section is far from being a brutal crash-through. I also like how easily one can observe the almost perfect ternary (three-part) proportions - and it amazes me every time that, at the 0:51 mark, there's still time to get everything in.

As I discussed once in a little imaginary **dialogue**, at some point we might as well face the fact that we live in an electronic world, and that this might even impact what we do with the "classics." Sometimes. In fact, we already spend a lot of our lives experiencing the classics electronically, whether via mp3, CD, LP, or 8-track. Anyone who follows this blog will know that I find **this kind of marriage of old and new** irresistible, much more so than I do most other types of electronic music. That, of course, says a lot about how old-fashioned my basic tastes are, but at least I can feel like I'm up to the minute for a minute or so.

---

See also: **Ghostly Chopin**



SUNDAY, JULY 8, 2012

*Dances with words*

My Blogger [profile](#) mentions that reading Douglas Hofstadter's *Le ton beau de Marot* changed my life. (I began [another post](#) exactly the same way five years ago, just to be self-referential.) My profile goes on to say, "I also like exploring other creative pursuits such as...writing poetry that rhymes; and creating effective translations (yes that's creative!)." I can say almost for certain that I would've written a lot fewer poems were it not for Hofstadter. Why, just three posts ago (which I'm embarrassed to say was three *months* ago), I [blogged](#) about a set of sonnets I wrote for my daughter, and that post includes links to quite a few other bits of MMrhyming. I also would surely never have embarked upon and completed a full translation of a French operetta into singable (I hope), rhyming English had I not read this book. The operetta is Gounod's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*, and that translation had much to do with me becoming a doctor in spite of myself. That's a kind of self-referential loop that Hofstadter would love.

Hofstadter is most famous for another sprawling, crazy-brilliant work, the Pulitzer Prize-winning (1980) *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, which I have to admit I've never quite finished, though I've started it many times. It's all about self-referential loops such as Bach's *Crab Canon*, Escher's loopy drawings, and Gödel's "Incompleteness Theorem." But, it's *really* about consciousness, and the ways in which our minds (in Hofstadter's view) arise from incredibly intricate, self-referential patterns - sort of; remember, I never finished the book! (The Gödel math stuff is pretty complicated - so many symbols.)



*Le Ton beau de Marot* debuted in 1997, tackling some of the same questions through the prism of language. I first read it in 1998 and I just finished my second reading yesterday. Though critical consensus seems to hold that it is a lesser book than *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, I strongly disagree. I find its every page to be inspiring in a way that makes the mind dance which, by the way, is what music does as well. The book happens to be subtitled "In Praise of the Music of Language," and I was first drawn to it by that subtitle, and because I was becoming interesting in philosophical questions concerting musical transcriptions. Hofstadter's book is all about linguistic translations, which I (more than Hofstadter, as I'll discuss in posts to come) see as significantly analogous to musical transcriptions. Come to think of it, I find myself disagreeing with lots of what Hofstadter has to say about music, although he and I share pretty similar tastes, which reminds me of a fun little story...

[Just a couple of days ago](#), I was reading along while simultaneously listening to some music. It's fairly unusual for me to double-dip like this, but I'd just downloaded this Cho-Lian Ling Lin [recording](#) of Prokofiev and Stravinsky concertos because I've recently fallen head over heels in love with Prokofiev's first concerto. (Listen to [this](#) from about 5:35 on if you don't know the piece; surely the most breathtakingly beautiful ending to any concerto ever, but I digress...) I've listened to that concerto, in various recordings, probably 20 times in the past few weeks; in this case, the first concerto had ended, and I'd gone back to focusing on Hofstadter as the second concerto played. The second concerto I've known and loved for years, having accompanied it many times, but I hadn't listened to it for quite a long time. Lin was ripping through the wild finale as I turned to p.460 of *Le Ton beau de Marot*, and suddenly I found myself reading the following passage. [Here, Hofstadter is discussing musical tastes and his trying to come to some understanding of why people would rudely blare rock'n'roll out windows

into the neighborhood. He admits that he hates rock'n'roll, but feels that the blaring itself is unconscionably rude. Until...]

...up popped the following memory from April, 1966. It's a beautiful crisp sunny spring morning in Ravenna, Italy. My parents and my sister and I are staying in a pretty hotel, and I wake up in an absolutely exuberant mood, with the Prokofiev second violin concerto running incredibly strongly through my head. I happen to have brought my tape recorder along on our trip, and I even have a tape of that piece with me. Almost breathlessly, I pull the tape out of my suitcase, mount it on the machine, fast-forward to the proper number, turn the volume up to maximum, and then - I ecstatically blast the sounds of Prokofiev's second violin concerto throughout the halls of our hotel. Noise-pollution city! Luckily for me, nobody complains.

OK, it's just a crazy coincidence (though much moreso because it turned out to be the second concerto I *hadn't* been listening to non-stop), but on some more abstract level, I find that Hofstadter's thinking out loud (in print) always resonates with me. By no means does this mean that I always agree with him; indeed, I suspect one reason *Le Ton beau de Marot* has turned off some critics is because the author is so blunt about his own opinions, some of which are quite strong and even just plain obnoxious - and he goes after some pretty big names. In future posts, I'm hoping to blog about some points on which I disagree with him, but I hope it's always with a deep appreciation for the brilliance of his vision. When I say his writing "resonates," I kind of mean the term in its musical sense - Hofstadter's words bounce around in my mind, vibrate, and create a richly complex halo of thoughts - thoughts about thinking, which of course is yet another example of self-reference.

Although I'm sad to have finished the book (the fact that the final chapter is quite sad doesn't help), I'm sure these resonances will keep bouncing around in my head in the weeks ahead. Why, just yesterday I saw that my sister had corrected herself in a Facebook comment, apologizing that Auto-correct had rendered "ill-mannered" as "I'll-mannered." I mused to myself that "being I'll-mannered" suggests an ill-mannered kind of selfishness, so I started typing up a clever comment along the lines of: "Being I'll-mannered is more likely to make you ill-mannered than being you'll-mannered or we'll-mannered..." and then it just jumped off the page. Just as "I'll" converts easily to "ill," by the exact same apostrophe-dropping process, "we'll" converts to "well," and "well-mannered" is just as commonly used as its opposite.

Within minutes, I was **tweeting** my own brand-new apostroph-ic aphorism (though someone's probably thought of it before):

He who's well-mannered is likely to be we'll-mannered. He who's ill-mannered is likely to be I'll-mannered.

Now, this is hardly the most inspired or creative of discoveries, but this *process* of discovery is the kind of thing Hofstadter loves to deconstruct, a curious combination of computer confusion, coincidental connotations, and chance conscious connection. There's no etymological reason why these word pairs (I'll/ill - we'll/well) should yield such parallel meanings when paired with "mannered," but the fact that they do is a small thing of beauty - a musical pattern emerging from an unexpected place. I strongly suspect my immersion in Hostadterana primed me to make experience this incidental insight.

Hofstadter's investigations of artificial intelligence are based on something much deeper than the kind of database-based "thinking" that *confuses* Auto-correct - he would rightly scoff at the idea that Auto-correct has the kind of awareness to experience actual confusion. For Hofstadter, thinking lies in the kind of pattern-matching that inspires us to make meaningful analogies - like saying a set of printed words on a page can "make my mind dance" or that they can "resonate" in my head. But, resonate they do.

More to come...including some of my own poetic responses to Hofstadter's translation challenges.