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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Bach, Ligeti, Saariaho, and Pizaro: A Recital

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

in

Music

by

David Medine

Committee in charge:

Professor Charles Curtis, Chair
Professor Jane Stevens
Professor Steven Schick

2009

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2009

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Bach, Ligeti, Saariaho, and Pizaro: A Recital

by

David Medine

Master of Arts in Music

University of California San Diego, 2009

Professor Charles Curtis, Chair

This Master's thesis is a document that accompanies my Master's viola recital which took place on November 6, 2009 at the University of California, San Diego. This recital consists of *Mind is Moving (V)* by Michael Pizaro, *Sonata in g-minor* by J. S. Bach, *Vent Nocturne* by Kaija Saariaho, and György Ligeti's work *Sonate for Viola Solo*. The first chapter is an introduction and each subsequent chapter deals with the individual pieces on the program. A recording of this performance is on file at the Mandeville Special Collections Library.

Chapter 1

Introduction: SET! Theory

SET! is a card game requiring a special deck in which players must take sets of three cards from a field of twelve or more cards laying face up. Once a set is taken, three more cards are added to the field. It is conceivable that no sets exist within a group of twelve, although this is rare. In this case, three more cards are added to the field. The card game is for two or more players, the winner being the player that gathers the most sets by the time deck is exhausted.

A 'Set' is 3 cards in which each individual feature is either all the SAME on each card... OR all DIFFERENT on each card. That is to say, any feature in the 'Set' of three cards is either common to all three cards or is different on each card. The Features are:
Symbols: Each card has ovals, squiggles, or diamonds on it;
Color: The symbols are red, green, or purple;
Number: Each card has one, two, or three symbols on it;
Shading: The symbols are solid, striped or open.¹

The idea behind the organization of this Master's recital is based on the principle of 'Sets.' Each piece is similar enough to one another that their differences are complementary and dissimilar enough that their shared qualities are interesting. What these qualities are is much more individually determined than the purely

¹The New York Times Online, <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/crosswords/setpuzzle.html>

objective ones displayed by SET! cards, and the metaphor does not correlate from cards to music in anything approaching synonymous mapping. Nonetheless, when designing a program that incorporates a wide variety of musical styles an overarching organizing principle is essential. The idea of the ‘Set,’ is a very useful one. It is vague enough to be inclusive of many things, yet rigid enough to provide cohesion between them.

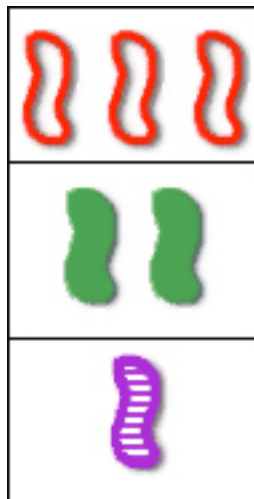


Figure 1.1: Example of a set.

To some extent it is the job of the audience to decide in what ways these works do and do not constitute a ‘Set.’ However, some facets of these works are obvious as similarities and differences. For example, each piece is of similar length (fifteen to twenty minutes), and each piece is written for viola solo. In the context of this recital, there is another unifying factor. Tonality shows the listener a very clear sense of beginning, middle and end. Harmony progresses and cadences are inevitable. The greatest consequence of an absence of tonality (none of these pieces but the Bach is tonal) is that this parameter of directing the ear is not a direct function of melodic and harmonic material. Without this ‘particular gravity of

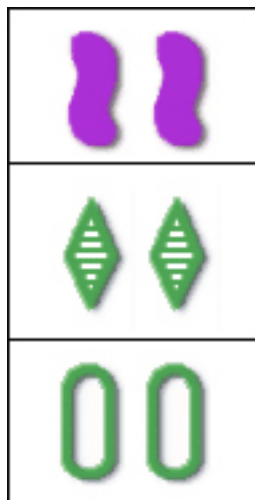


Figure 1.2: Example of a non-set.

chords which is tonality,' as Glenn Gould puts it,² the material and form of a composition are divorced. Therefore, a composition in an atonal idiom must either abandon 'gravity' or find a method of creating it with alternative techniques. The Bach is tonal, and so for this piece, the problem is moot. The other three deal with this issue each in a unique way and this, to my mind, qualifies as a 'Set' sameness.

The plain differences are as follows. One piece is by a female (Saariaho). One piece includes electronics (also Saariaho). In one piece duration is indicated by lengths of time in seconds rather than by conventional rhythmic notation (Pisaro). Also, Pisaro's work is the only one that focuses exclusively on a single technique. The Bach is the only piece that is not 'contemporary music,' and it is the only piece not originally for viola. The Ligeti is different in that it explicitly features folk music elements and it is the only piece that was composed incrementally over a long period of time (four years). Each composer is from a different country. The Pisaro is in one movement, the Bach in four. The Saariaho has two movements

²Glenn Gould. *Arnold Schoenberg-A Perspective*, forward by Dr. Arthur Darack (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Occasional Press, 1964) p. 5.

and the Ligeti has six.

Chapter 2

Michael Pisaro, *Mind is Moving* (*V*) (1996)

Mind is Moving (V) suspends one's sense of time. It is a very long piece and extreme length in a piece often disorients one's perception of temporal rate. I play it here in its most abbreviated form. In its complete entirety the piece lasts nearly an hour, but the composer provides directions for shorter performances. The score consists of forty-second-long modules that are made up of a delicate sound that lasts some amount of time equal to or less than forty seconds. These sounds (plus silence if they are indicated to last less than forty seconds) alternate with discrete forty-second-long silences and there are forty of these pairs. Although the performance may begin at any point in the score and end at least fifteen modules hence (the last one precedes the first), they must be played in order. One loses all orientation to the passing of time while listening to *Mind is Moving (V)*. This effect results not only from the sparse, still sound world, but also because there is no musical indication of direction in this piece. What Bach does with harmony, what Ligeti does with form and what Saariaho does with range is completely unaddressed in this composition.

Each module is either a single note or a double stop with open string.

Throughout the duration of this sound the violist is called upon to change (or not change) the amount of finger pressure he or she uses to stop the note. The degree of this change, its starting point and end point vary from module to module. Everything is to be played as quietly as possible. To perform this piece is to create a continuous musical space that is both pacific yet intriguing. It is like casting a spell.

This piece is not about ‘melody’ or ‘harmony’ *per se*, but it is very interesting to approach the music in this way. The quality of tonal harmony that gives it Gouldian ‘gravity’ is the dynamic of tension and release. This dynamism of tonality is typified in the cadence. *Mind is Moving (V)* has no cadences in the conventional sense. The pitches can be analyzed and scrutinized for harmonic implication, but the prolific silences tend to obliterate any sense of harmonic continuity. Certainly there is no sense of harmonic cadence. However, there is a moment of extreme tension that occurs when, after forty or more seconds of silence, the performer emerges from stillness and puts the bow to the string in preparation for a new sound. Even after a few modules have gone by, and the unaltered pace of the piece has been established there is excitement and anticipation in the moment of beginning each new sound. This tension is created by two elements, the prolonged silence, and the fact that sounds never repeat. The release of this tension is gradual, lasting until the timbre has fully developed and receded back into silence. This process occurs very regularly, yet slightly differently every time, and this is the ideal recipe for creating a powerful sense of anticipation: foreseeing surprise.

When I first approached this work it struck me as a kind of living sound installation. It is the timelessness of the experience of listening to this piece that gives it this quality. I asked Mr. Pisaro (who is a professor of composition at CalArts that I have never before met or spoken to) via email if he agreed with my ‘living installation’ idea. He replied that he had not thought of the piece in this way, and that he did write a violin duo which is specifically intended for an installation

scenario. He pointed out that part of *Mind is Moving (V)* is that it demands the kind of concentrated listening that only exists in a concert situation. However, he did sympathize with my initial understanding of the piece as quasi-installation, and clearly this is a situation that is not far from his aesthetic.

Chapter 3

J. S. Bach, *Sonata for Solo*

Violin in g-minor, BWV 1001

(1720)

During his years as Capellmeister at Cöthen (1717-1723), J. S. Bach produced a number of collections of solo instrumental works that clearly have pedagogic intention. These collections include the *Sei Soli a Violino senza Basso accompagnato (Six Solos)*, *Das Wohltempirte Clavier*, and the *Aufrichtige Anleitung*, and (if we are to assume that they date from this period as well) *Six Suites for Solo Cello*.¹ Several earlier versions of preludes that became part of the *WTC* as well as the Inventions and Sinfonias that were later compiled as the *Aufrichtige Anleitung* appear in the Wilhelm Friedmann *Clavier-Büchlein* of 1720.² The title pages of the *WTC*, and the *Aufrichtige Anleitung* clearly indicate Bach's purpose in creating these collections:

¹There is no autograph manuscript of the *Cello Suites*. Anna Magdelana's copy is dated 1728. Wolff dates their composition from the Cöthen period, or perhaps even earlier. Christoph Wolff. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), p. 196.

²Wolff, p. 226.

Das Wohltemperirte Clavier, or preludes and fugues through all the tones and semitones, both as regards the tertia major, or Ut Re Mi and as concerns the tertia minor or Re Mi Fa. For the use and profit of the musical youth desirous of learning as well as for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.

Aufrichtige Anleitung, wherein the lovers of the clavier, and especially those desirous of learning, are shown a clear way not only (1) to learn to play clearly in two voices but also, after further progress, (2) to deal correctly and well with three obligato parts; furthermore, at the same time not only to have good invetiones but to develop the same well and, above all, to arrive at a singing style in playing and at the same time to acquire a strong foretaste of composition.³

Cristoph Wolff asserts that the title pages to the *WTC* and the *Aufrichtige Anleitung* (as well as the title page to the *Orgel-Büchlein* of 1723) were prepared as part of Bach's application to the authorities at Leipzig for the post of Cantor and music director in Leipzig. Bach's purpose in submitting these materials with these carefully composed title pages was to demonstrate that he was not only a first rate composer, but an excellent pedagogue as well.⁴

The *Six Solos*, although they survive in a handsome autograph, do not include such a preamble. However, the autograph of the *Six Solos* does have a somewhat lengthy title in Italian (translation by Joel Lester): 'Six Solos. for Violin without Bass accompaniment. First Book. by Joh. Seb. Bach. in the year 1720.'⁵ There are three notable pieces of information in this title. First, Bach insists that the works be played without accompaniment. Second, the words '*Libro Primo*,' prompts the question: what is the '*Secondo Libro*?' The commonly accepted answer is that the *Cello Suites*, for which there is no autograph, are this second

³Wolff, p. 226.

⁴Wolff does not speculate that these works were composed for this purpose. In fact, he surmises quite the contrary, namely that fair copies of the pieces and carefully worded title pages were created as resume cover letters. Wolff, pp. 226-227.

⁵Joel Lester. *Bach's Works for Solo Violin: Style, Structure, Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 11.

book.⁶ However, Wolff dates the *Cello Suites* contemporary to or perhaps earlier than the creation of the violin solos.⁷ This does not exclude the possibility that a perhaps lost autograph of the *Cello Suites* bears the term ‘*Secondo Libro*,’ (a sound possibility considering Bach’s habit of recompiling his instrumental works from this period) but one must consider that the Ana Magdalena copy of the *Cello Suites* has titles for each movement in French, while the *Six Solos* is exclusively in Italian. Another possibility is that Bach planned to compose a subsequent book (or books) for violin solo but never did. Third, there is the date. This plainly places the generation of these works just before or perhaps overlapping with the *WTC*.

The *Sonata in g-minor* is not one of Bach’s very greatest works. In my opinion it is the least striking of all the *Six Solos* (it is nonetheless a wonderful piece), but seeing it in this context gives it greater significance. It is not just a thrilling piece for a student of violin virtuosity (or an adventurous violist), it is also a document that provides a snapshot of an artistic mind moving at inhuman speeds.

To play this piece on the viola is rather challenging. The leaps are larger, the chords are further apart, and the velocity and brilliance required for the fourth movement is very difficult to achieve on viola. However, the piece is a pedagogic one, and even if it does not translate perfectly from violin to viola, making the attempt is an educational experience.

⁶In his article on the instrumental music of J. S. Bach, Werner Brieg hypothesizes: ‘These words [*Libro Primo*] clearly imply that Bach intended to continue the series with a *Secondo libro* of works for unaccompanied cello, as indeed he did.’ Werner Brieg. ‘The Instrumental Music,’ *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 126.

⁷Wolff p. 196. It should be noted, that Wolff also assumes the link between the *Six Solos* and the *Cello Suites*: Wolff p. 231.

Chapter 4

Kaija Saariaho, *Vent Nocturne* (2006)

This is what Saariaho writes about her piece for viola and electronics:

The idea for *Vent nocturne* (Night Wind) first occurred to me while I was reading a bilingual edition on the poems of Georg Trakl. This synchronicity of the two languages - German and French - led me to muse on the relationship between the viola and electronics.

The work is in two parts: *Sombres miroirs* (Dark Mirrors) and *Soupirs de l'obscur* (Breaths of the Obscure). These, as their names suggest, focus first on symmetrical thinking and then on the variation of the glissando, not unlike a sigh, that rounds off the phrases.

To me the sound of the viola has always suggested that of breathing, which, along with the wind, became a major element of the electronic part.

Kaija Saariaho¹

Knowing Kaija Saariaho very slightly (she is a very tall and forthright individual that is not fond of explaining her music) it is my opinion that the first paragraph is a bit contrived. Perhaps this was written merely because the publisher requested

¹This note is online at the publisher's website, <http://www.chesternovello.com>.

a note. It sometimes happens. Regardless, I am not at all convinced that her idea for the piece came about as she reports, but it is interesting to think of the viola and electronics as parallel to poetry in German and French.

National identity immediately after World War II was shunned by the European *avante garde*. The young composers of the 1950's (Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, etc.) saw nationalism and nationalistic pride as the source of the terror in which they were brought up. They strove to demolish these boundaries by saying goodbye to the nationalistic traditions and adopting a hybrid all of the important (as they saw them) compositional innovations that originated in each European nation. Prior to this artistic continentalization, there is a distinct strain in Western music history that can be described as a push and pull between French vs. German aesthetic tendencies. This is a theme that arises again and again. There are many parallels. The Troubadors and Trouveres of twelfth century Provence and France had German counterparts in the thirteenth century Minnesingers. Rameau and Bach stand as dual foci in the elliptical orbit of late Baroque style and the codification of modern harmony. There is Meyerbeer vs. Mendelsohn, Berlioz vs. Wagner, Debussy vs. Mahler and Stravinsky (who is stylistically French if he is anything) vs. Schönberg.

So where does Saariaho fit into all of this? Being Finnish, her musical background is somewhat affected by that most nationalistic of nationalists Jean Sibelius. However, most of her compositional formation occurred in Western Europe. She was at IRCAM, she was influenced by the spectralists, and she studied composition with Brian Ferneyhough in Freiburg. Currently, she resides in Paris, and is very active in the United States (she's been commissioned by The Emerson String Quartet and acted as composer in residence at the Santa Fe Opera Festival). So she sits, a Finn in Paris, reading German poetry in French whilst composing for viola and electronics.

This is a typical situation for contemporary music, and ‘classical’ music in general. This music originates from the big nations in Europe (France, Germany, Italy). From there it seeped into and incorporated aspects of the musical traditions of Russia, England, Spain, The Baltic States, The Nordic States and The United States. The original identity of this tradition was demolished and reconstructed by the artistic elite in the aftermath of the Second World War. Coupled with this, there is the propagation of these traditions throughout the non-European community. In Asia, Southern America, and, most recently, in Middle Eastern nations such as Palestine ‘classical’ music becomes increasingly popular.² The tradition is rippling throughout the twenty-first century global community. Traditions are no longer national, they are individual, and they are accessible anywhere that individuals exist.

Vent Nocturne is not tonal, although it is very melodic. It could even be thought of as modal, but this is an incomplete description. There are spectral elements as well, but no compositional philosophy for using pitch is strictly adhered to. The harmonic/melodic language recognizably and uniquely Saariaho. Part of this piece’s success is that despite its atonality, there is a great deal of ‘gravity’ (in the Gouldian sense). In the first movement this is achieved by form. Repetition and moments of climax are used to dog-ear sections and give the listener a sense of inevitable arrival. In the second movement, ‘gravity’ is created through an instrumental technique. The solo viola part begins in the upper part of the tessitura and gradually descends through glissandi to the very lowest part of the instrument. Like the Pizarro, *Supirs de l’obscur* is made up of audible phrases separated by moments of silence. Saariaho’s silences are much shorter than Pizarro’s, and the audible phrase are far more various in their shape, length and content, but, like *Mind is Moving (V)*, the silences are regular and equal.

²Wakin, Daniel J. ‘Minuets, Sonatas and Politics in the West Bank,’ *The New York Times*, 31 May 31 2009, New York edition Arts section, C1.

Chapter 5

György Ligeti, *Sonate for Viola Solo* (1991-1994)

This piece is the most set-like of any of the pieces that make up this set of pieces. It is a collection of disparate elements that seem to contradict, yet serve to complement each other. Like the Bach *Sonata in g-minor*, it follows the template of a Baroque form, the *sonata da chiesa*, in which movements alternate slow-fast-slow-fast. Ligeti's *Sonate* is comprised of six movements, while the typical *sonata da chiesa* (as is the case with Bach's) contains but four. However, the last three movements of Ligeti's *Sonate* are marked '*attacca*' and can therefore be treated as one long fast movement, with a slow middle section. Viewed in this manner, the piece conforms quite perfectly to the *sonata da chiesa* outline.

This blurring of stylistic/formal distinctions begins immediately. The first movement, *Hora lungă*, is meant to evoke, as Ligeti explains in the preface,

[...]the spirit of Romanian Folk music, which, together with Hungarian folk music and that of the Gipsies, made a strong impression on me during my childhood. However I do not write folklore or use folkloristic quotes, it is rather allusions which are made. *Hora lungă* literally means 'slow dance' but in the Romanian tradition this is not a dance but are

sung folk melodies...nostalgic and melancholy.¹

Further references to the idea of dance form and direct allusions to Bach arise throughout the piece. The penultimate movement (*Lamento*) is not unlike a *Louret*,² a Baroque dance featured in Bach's third partita for solo violin, BWV 1006. However, as in the first movement, we again see the superimposition of the dance tradition and the vocal one. '*Lamento*' implies vocalization, while the form refers to a dance tradition.

Another parameter of variable conglomeration is the languages which Ligeti chooses for his titles. The first movement's title is Romanian (*Hora lungă*), the second is in English (*Loop*). The third is in Hungarian (*Facsar*), while the fourth (*Presto con sordino*) and fifth (*Lamento*) are in Italian. The finale's title is French (*Chaconne chromatique*) and Ligeti chose the German form, *Sonate*, for the title of the entire piece.

It is impossible to write a sonata for solo string instrument without acknowledgement of the *Six Solos for Violin* and the *Six Cello Suites* by J. S. Bach (BWVs 1001-1012). Ligeti, with his penchant for drawing diverse elements together, plunges right into this association and exploits it fully. The opening pitches of the third movement (*Facsar*) are A-B-C-Bflat, or A-H-C-B, a not so subtle reference to Bach. Ligeti urges further comparison to Bach by ending the piece with a chaconne. However, Ligeti, in his preface, states: 'Allusions to the famous Bach chaconne should not be expected!'³

So I will point out only one allusion to Bach's famous *Ciaccona* (the finale to Bach's *Partita in d-minor*, BWV 1004). Ligeti's *Chaconne Chromatique* is based on a repeating eight-bar rhythmic figure with alternating accentuation. Bach's chaconne is based on a repeating eight-bar harmonic progression. There is a moment

¹György Ligeti. *Sonate for Solo Viola* (Mainz: Schott, 2001), Preface.

²Steven Schani. *György Ligeti's Sonata for Solo Viola (1991-1994): A Dissertation in Music* (Kansas City: University of Missouri, 2001), p. 57.

³György Ligeti. *Sonate for Solo Viola* (Mainz: Schott, 2001), Preface.

in the Bach chaconne, bar 133, in which Bach switches from the minor mode to the major. This occurs within a calm moment that follows a long climactic section. The odd thing about this is that this striking change occurs half-way through the eight-bar pattern. There is an analogous moment (bar 44) in the Ligeti chaconne in which a climax is achieved half-way through the eight-bar rhythmic figure, and bar 45 begins at a suddenly softer dynamic. This sudden shift in dynamic is Ligeti's take on Bach's shifting modes.

Like his contemporaries from further West (Boulez etc.) Ligeti (an ancestrally German Jew from Transylvania) promotes a pan-national musical style, but unlike them, Ligeti does not so vehemently strive towards innovation. His art shows unabashed reference and reverence to traditional folk and 'classical' music. Nevertheless, his compositions are quite innovative. The memory is what gives him inspiration; and, even more than that, it provides the stage upon which his music is acted out. In her forthcoming work on Ligeti's opera *Le Grande Macabre*, Amy Bauer sums up Ligeti's conception of history and musical space:

According to Ligeti we experience form from an inverted, illusionary perspective: although musical shapes and events themselves create a sense of 'space' the listener imagines them as placed in a space that already exists.[...]Ligeti reasons that any individual work itself is related to the sum total of music history; the musical present is thus a potent concentrate of 'all music previously experienced.'⁴

⁴Amy Bauer. 'The Transparent Tangle of History: Parody Illusion and Desire in Gyrgy Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*' (forthcoming) alluding to György Ligeti. 'Form in der Neuen Musik' *Gesammlte Schriften*, vol. I, ed. Monika Lichtenfeld (Mainz: Schott, 2007), pp. 185-186.