

YellowBarn

In Return for My Song: Tonalities at once ancient and new

The Parker String Quartet and Ian Rosenbaum, percussion

December 20, 2014 | 8:00 | Next Stage, Putney, VT

The play of tension and release is a vitally important element in our experience of music, and tonality, the hierarchical relationship between pitches or harmonies, is one framework that guides us. Much is asked of an audience experiencing new work with sounds that are less familiar, but the ear is quick and can adapt to new sounds when context is there to guide us.

The centerpiece of this residency is a microtonal work by composer James Wood titled "Déploration sur la mort de Gérard Grisey". Microtonal music makes use of intervals smaller than the evenly spaced, Western semi-tone, and is used in a wide variety of music; from traditional systems of Indian music and Indonesian gamelan music, to rock and roll and the blues.

The Parker Quartet and Ian Rosenbaum will take us on a sonic adventure that explores the incredible variety of music that can be referred to as "microtonal" and works that stretch our concept of other tonal systems.

Jonathan Harvey (1939-2012) Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco (1980)

From 1976 to 1980 my son Dominic was a chorister at Winchester cathedral. During that period, and ever since, I have written a number of works associated with that wonderful building and choir. Listening to the choir rehearse, as I often did, with the bells simultaneously ringing above, was one of the mingled impressions which started me on this work: it is entirely based on the boy's voice and that of the largest bell.

On this huge black bell is inscribed in beautiful lettering the following text: HORAS AVOLANTES NUMERO, MORTUOS PLANGO, VIVOS AD PRECES VOCO (I count the feeling hours, I lament the dead, I call the living to prayer). The bell counts time (each section has a differently pitched bell stroke at its beginning): it is itself a 'dead' sound for all its richness of sonority: the boy represents the living element. The bell surrounds the audience; they are, as it were, inside it: the boy 'flies' around like a free spirit. —Jonathan Harvey

Anton Webern (1883-1945) from Six Bagatelles , Op.9, No.4: Sehr langsam (1911-13)

Tan Dun (b.1957) Eight Colors for String Quartet (1986)

Peking Opera
Shadows
Pink Actress
Black Dance
Zen
Drum and Gong
Cloudiness
Red Sona

[cont'd]

Special thanks to Matt Stamell of Stamell Stringed Instruments in Amherst, Massachusetts for providing instruments for tonight's performance of Harry Partch's *Two Studies on Ancient Greek Scales*.

Eight Colors for String Quartet was the first piece I wrote after coming to New York in 1986. It shares the dark, ritualized singing, very dramatic form, and attention to tone color and dynamic with my pieces written in China, but still is very different from them. This string quartet marks the period of my first contact with the concentrated, lyrical language of western atonality. From it, I learned how to handle repetition, but otherwise responded in my own way, out of my own culture, not following the Second Vienna School. I drew on Chinese colors, on the techniques of Peking Opera—familiar to me since childhood. The work consists of eight very short sections, almost like a set of brush paintings, through which materials are shared and developed. The subjects are described by the eight interrelated titles, and form a drama, a kind of ritual performance structure. Not only timbre, but the actual string techniques are developed from Peking Opera; the vocalization of Opera actresses, and Buddhist chanting can be heard. Although a shadow of atonal pitch organization remains in some sections of this piece, I began to find a way to mingle old materials from my culture with the new, to contribute something to the western idea of atonality, and to refresh it. I found a danger in later atonal writing to be that it is too easy to leave yourself out of the music. I wanted to find ways to remain open to my culture, and open to myself. —Tan Dun

Tawnie Olson (b.1974) Meadowlark (2014)

Tawnie Olson (b.1974) The Blackbird at Evening (2013)

James Wood (b.1953) Déploration sur la mort de Gérard Grisey (2000)

Déploration was written as a response to the sudden and tragically early death, in November 1998, of Gérard Grisey, and is dedicated to his memory.

Gérard was a great composer and a wonderful man. His music had a rare combination of warmth, depth, subtlety, drama and humour... and an unceasing preoccupation with detail. As one of the fathers of what has become known as 'spectralism', his work has been profoundly important in the evolution of contemporary music in the second half of the twentieth century. I feel privileged to have known him for many years.

The melodic material of Déploration is based on five of the Constellations proper to Grisey's birth date (17th June)— Gemini, Monoceros, Lynx, Canis Major and Canis Minor—each of these constellations is transformed by geometric rotation, in 30 steps around 360 degrees, to reveal twelve basic permutations which form the basis of a continuously evolving melodic thread. —James Wood

Intermission

Jeff Beck A Day in the Life (2010)

John Lee Hooker Boom Boom (1969)

Jon Catler Planet Slicer 1 (2007)

Radiohead How to Disappear Completely (2000)

Harry Partch (1901-1974) from Two Studies on Ancient Greek Scales, Olympos' Pentatonic (1946)

Luciano Berio (1925-2003) Naturale (1985-6)

The act of transcription, such as translation, may involve three different conditions: an identification with the composer's original musical text, the assumption of the text as a pretext for experimentation and, ultimately, the oppression of the text, its deconstruction and philological abuse. I think you reach a solution when these three conditions co-exist. It is only then, I believe, that the transcript becomes an act really creative and constructive. Naturale, written between 1985 and 1986 is a piece designed for dance, and is in part derived from a more complex work of 1984 (Voices), where is placed, precisely, the problem of the convergence of those three conditions. The original texts of Natural Sicilian songs are commented upon by the voice of Celano, perhaps the last true Sicilian storyteller, which I had the privilege and good fortune to meet (and record) in Palermo in the summer of 1968. I am deeply grateful to Aldo Bennici for providing me with the original documents: work songs, love, lullabies. The voice of Celano is inserted in the path of the purple instrumental, singing instead of abbagnate (songs of hawkers) of rare intensity. With Naturale, as with Voices, I hope to help encourage a deeper interest for the Sicilian folk music, which with the Sardinian, is certainly the most rich, complex and glow of our Mediterranean culture.
—Luciano Berio

Harry Partch (1901-1974) from Two Studies on Ancient Greek Scales, Archytas' Enharmonic (1946)
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Grosse Fuga, Op.133 (1825-6)

Anton Webern (1883-1945) from Six Bagatelles, Op.9, No.4: Sehr langsam (1911-13)
Frederic Rzewski (b.1938) To the Earth (1985)

*To the Earth, Mother of all, I will sing:
the well-established, the oldest,
who nourishes on her surface everything that
lives.*

*Those things that walk upon the holy ground,
and those that swim in the sea, and those that
fly;
all these are nourished by your abundance.*

*It is thanks to you if we humans have healthy
children and rich harvests.*

*Great Earth, you have the power to give life to
and to take it away from creatures that must
die.*

*Happy are the ones whom you honor with
your kindness and gifts;
what they have built will not vanish.*

*Their fields are fertile, their herds prosper,
and their houses are full of good things.
Their cities are governed with just laws; their
women are beautiful;
good fortune and wealth follow them.
Their children are radiant with the joy of
youth.
The young women play in the flowery
meadows,
dancing with happiness in their hearts.*

*Holy Earth, Undying Spirit,
so it is with those whom you honor.
Hail to you, Mother of Life.
You who are loved by the starry sky;
Be generous and give me a happy life
in return for my song,
so that I can continue to praise you with my
music.*