

February 2022

by Derek Katz

Lou Harrison (1917-2003), Varied Trio, arr. Julie Steinberg for violin, piano and percussion (1986/87)

Lou Harrison's Varied Trio is an excellent guide, not only to his compositional practices, but also to his approach to music making as a cooperative enterprise rooted in personal connections. Harrison's music is usually marked by a strong sense of place, whether his own Northern California home, the Asian side of the Pacific Rim or semi-imagined locations from Europe's past. The Varied Trio uses both instruments and musical structures to evoke time and place. The first movement is inspired by Indonesian Gamelan music. The title, "Gending" refers to the phrase structure of gamelan music, in which large gongs are used to mark groupings of beats organized into repeating cycles. Harrison uses a similar method of musical organization, combining layers of music moving at different speeds with isolated strokes on the gong and on the case of the piano delineating rhythmic cycles. Chinese rice bowls played with chopsticks move the second movement ("Bow Bells") to a different Asian location. The third movement ("Elegy") does not seem to have a location, but was described by Harrison as an "expressive rhapsody," primarily for violin and piano, but also with the distinctive sound of the vibraphone with the dampers raised. The fourth movement, "Rondeau for Fragonard" moves us back to the 18th century France of Jean-Honoré Fragonard with a duet for violin and piano in manner of Parisian court music from the time of the painter's youth (notably, the only "European" movement is the only one without percussion). Like the medieval and Renaissance chansons setting poems in the Rondeau form, this movement uses a repeated refrain. The final "Dance" combines objects and ideas from different places, including the Chinese bowls and baking pans inspired by a set found by Harrison and his partner, Bill Colvig, in a local kitchen supply store. The idea that nearly anything can be a musical instrument is very characteristic for Harrison, who constructed an "American Gamelan" with Colvig using found objects ranging from oxygen tanks to garbage cans.

The Varied Trio arose from Harrison's friendship with the percussionist William Winant, with whom he had a number of musical collaborations. The original version of the piece had five participants, with Winant, keyboardist Julie Steinberg and violinist David Abel joined by Harrison playing harp and Colvig playing bells. While this first version was intended solely for these specific people and the festival in which it was premiered, Harrison had always planned to have the final version be a trio that could both be played by the Abel-Steinberg-Winant Trio and eventually by other performers. The published score is an arrangement by Julie Steinberg, in which the original keyboard part for virginal is given to a piano, which also takes over the harp part, while the parts for bells move to vibraphone and gongs. Again, the idea of a musical performance as being an expression of friendship, intended for specific human beings rather than for abstract instrumental performers is very representative of Harrison's larger views on music and life.

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Andy Akiho (1979-), *Stop Speaking*, for solo snare drum and digital playback (2011)

Andy Akiho's *Stop Speaking* is the first of a series of three pieces that both involve interactions between a human and digital technology, while also raising issues about the nature of that relationship. Who is leading, and who is following? Is the partnership an equal one?

In *Stop Speaking*, the human is a snare drummer, and her collaborator is a computer-generated voice. Akiho is himself a percussionist, with broad experiences including drum and bugle corps and Caribbean steel pan drumming, and most of his compositions combine percussion instruments with other forces. The snare drummer is the flesh-and-blood musician in this piece, but it is the digital voice who has a name, thoughts and feelings. She tells us that her name is Vicki (probably not coincidentally, Akiho has collaborated with the pianists Vicki Ray and Vicky Chow, and has dedicated a piece to them titled *Vick(i/y)*). Vicki is happy to provide the text for the piece, and glad to have been chosen from amongst the many speech preference voices (all with names). She is alive, but has worries about mortality. What happens to her when the piece is over, and she stops speaking? There also seems to be some mystery about how she has been created. Who chose her? Her part "was typed out word for word," but by whom? Either Vicki or her mysterious typist has a sly sense of humor about the limits of Microsoft Word's powers to generate speech.

We hear "using Microsoft Word," but Vicki is reading "you sing my crow soft word." These little jokes are only between Vicki and the snare drummer if we can't see the text, but some of the phonetic games have higher stakes. To be "alive" is not quite the same as being "a life," and certainly quite different from being "a lie." The computer-generated voice also doesn't adapt for punctuation, so we can't hear whether Vicki is stating or questioning what happens when she stops speaking (?/!).

So, if Vicki has such an active verbal presence and rich inner life, what of her partner on stage? Vicki gets all of the semantic space, but speaks in a monotone, while the snare drummer elicits a rich and diverse collection of timbres and methods of articulation from her single drum. The question of whether the drummer is responding to Vicki or part of some larger joint venture that requires both of them to participate will no doubt be perceived differently by different audience members. For her part, Ji Hye Jung feels that she "imagines having a dialogue with the computer through my instrument when performing. In other words, I choose to think of this work as an interaction between musician and computer rather than a solo accompanied by an inanimate object."

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Thierry De Mey (1956-), Silence Must Be, for solo conductor (2002)

At first blush, the idea of a piece for solo conductor may sound like something from the back catalogue of P.D.Q. Bach, or the basis for a comedy sketch. After all, as any orchestral musician will be happy to remind you, conductors don't actually make any sounds themselves, so what does it mean for a conductor to perform without a group to lead? Like Andy Akiho, Thierry De Mey trained as a percussionist, but De Mey has also been active as a filmmaker and worked extensively with choreographers, and *Silence Must Be* is a work with strong visual and theatrical components.

Silence Must Be begins with the conductor deriving a literal pulse from her own heartbeat, and beginning to beat time, dividing it into increasingly complex patterns, with her two hands marking different patterns. At this point, the piece seems to be about demarcating time, with the conductor, in the composer's words "tracing the contours of a silent, unspeakable music." Soon, however, the conductor's hands make gestures that seem more expressive than rhythmical,

and we begin to perceive her as a choreographed body instead of as a time-beater. As Jung puts it, her "hands are dancing in air." About halfway through the piece, the conductor does make some sounds with her body, turning the hands that have shaped time and space into musical instruments. Then, the entire series of gestures is repeated, now in the presence of an electronic soundscape. As was the case with the Akiho work, this encourages us to think about the nature of the interaction. The gestures are all familiar to us, and map very closely onto the electronic sounds. Does it feel as if the conductor is conjuring the sounds (which we know to be prerecorded) out of thin air? Does it feel as if the conductor is responding to the sounds? Were the silent gestures shaped by the soundscape that we just hadn't heard yet? The piece ends with an emphatic (if silent) performance of its title.

Mark Applebaum (1967-), Aphasia, for singer and tape (2010)

Following *Silence Must Be*, a piece for conductor without conductor, we have Mark Applebaum's *Aphasia*, for a singer who does not sing. Instead, she sits calmly, without changing facial expression, and makes a series of hand gestures synchronized to a pre-recorded soundtrack. The "tape" (actually a CD or digital sound file these days) contains sounds distilled and transformed by Applebaum from three hours of recordings of the baritone Nicholas Isherwood making what the composer calls "a bunch of crazy sounds." The final product, what Applebaum calls "an idiosyncratic explosion of warped and mangled sounds," is only occasionally recognizable as originating in vocalizations, sometimes perceptible as syllables, and only as words at the very end of the piece. The hand gestures are often recognizable as parts of daily life, and are indicated in the score with real-world associations ("cat pet," "cradle baby," "lemon squeeze"), but Applebaum does not intend for us to think of those actions, or imagine connections between them. Instead, they should form a "kind of invented nonsense sign language." Applebaum uses the gestures to highlight the absurd (and perhaps

comic) potential of our mundane everyday gestures when they have no surrounding context. While the Akiho and De Mey compositions raise questions about leading and responding, similarly, Applebaum specifies that the hand gestures should create the illusion of either causing the sounds, or being caused by them.

The piece was originally intended for Isherwood to perform himself, but he found the precise synchronization between gesture and sound impractical, and ended up performing a more improvised version. Although intended for a singer, according to the composer the piece has most often been championed by "intrepid percussionists," as will be the case in this performance. Jung says of the piece, "Mark Applebaum's *Aphasia* presents a unique set of challenges to performer. Not only must one learn to decipher a completely unique notation system, but one must then line up an endless series of bizarre gestures with a chaotic array of sounds. Even though I make no sound during this emotional journey, I pretend I am triggering the sounds myself as I struggle to speak."

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Christopher Cerrone (1984-), Hoyt-Schermerhorn, for piano and electronics (2010)

Christopher Cerrone's Hoyt-Schermerhorn is another piece that uses electronic sounds, but, unlike the preceding three works, has the electronic component in a clearly subsidiary role, both in terms of occupying relatively little time and in terms of being an enhancement of sounds from the piano rather than an independent element. This is also the first work on the program since the Lou Harrison Trio to feature a pitched acoustic instrument, and the first to be primarily about harmony. One way of hearing the piece is as being made up of three musical layers. The first consists of a series of evenly paced, quiet chords in the middle of the piano keyboard. Cerrone intends for these to sound like an improvisatory musing (the first version of the piece allowed the performer to choose her own sonorities), and the tempo gently fluctuates. These chords are then joined by deep, consonant, and slow contributions from the pianist's left hand, fingers spread wide.

This now seems like the primary element, but these sounds also move in turn to the background. The final layer consists of single-note ventures to the upper end of the keyboard, with each note shimmering in a halo of digital enhancement.

Like the Harrison Trio, Hoyt-Schermerhorn is music with a sense of place. The piece is named after a subway stop in Brooklyn frequented by Cerrone, and he writes that that it "explores the myriad and contradictory feelings that often come to me late at night in my city of choice—nostalgia, anxiety, joy, panic." He also calls it a "a tribute to the New York nightscape," giving us a time of day, as well as a geographical location. Cerrone calls the second half of the piece "a (mostly) soft and gentle lullaby, coated with a shatter of fragmented electronics breaking the quiet haze."

Kevin Puts (1972-), And Legions Will Rise, for violin, clarinet and marimba (2001)

Some Camerata Pacifica regulars will remember Kevin Puts's *And Legions Will Rise* from a scintillating January 2015 performance, also featuring Ji Hye Jung and Jose Franch-Ballester. Six years ago may very well seem longer than that, but this is an excellent time to experience the piece again, or to meet it for the first time. Composed in 2001, it is now old enough to vote, almost old enough to drink, and is a frequently-performed modern classic, well-established both on concert stages and in conservatory studios.

And Legions Will Rise, for violin, clarinet and marimba, comes with a specific scenario from the composer, who writes that it "is about the power in all of us to transcend during times of tragedy and personal crisis. While I was writing it, I kept imagining one of those war scenes in blockbuster films, with masses of troops made ready before a great battle. I think we have forces like this inside of us, ready to do battle when we are at our lowest moments." It's very easy to map that cinematic vision onto Puts's music, and, literal war aside, the general message of overcoming difficulties is especially welcome at this particular time. Beyond that, however, it is probably less important that the music was inspired by a particular image than that it has the potential to evoke many different associations and strong emotions.

You, the listener, don't need the composer (or a program annotator) to tell you what to feel when hearing this piece. You'll work that out on your own just fine.

The piece is not formally broken into separate movements, but it is made up of a series of different sections, run-together without pause, but each with a distinct character. This also leads the piece to be heard as a series of scenes (as opposed to a single continuous process), and encourages experiencing it as a dramatic narrative. Much of the variety of the piece comes from the use of rapidly repeated short figures, sometimes used to support lyrical melodies, and sometimes constituting a primary texture. The presence or absence of these figures makes for strong shifts in the level of rhythmic energy.

A quick scan of comments on YouTube videos of *And Legions Will Rise* reveals a strong preference for the word "beautiful," with the Camerata Pacifica page garnering a wider range of adjectives, including "gorgeous" and "yummy." It's also striking that a number of commentators link to specific favorite moments within the performance. It's not just a piece that moves listeners in positive ways, but one that does so in different ways at particular points in time.