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by Derek Katz

Isang Yun (1917-1995)
Etude No. 5 for Solo Flute (1974)

The idea that a Korean-born composer of music in the Western art tradition would be concerned with melding Eastern and Western elements is obvious to the point of cliché, but also unavoidably apt in the case of Isang Yun. Another potential cliché, that music can be a force to unify people across political boundaries, is an even more central principle in Yun's career. Born into a Korea occupied by Japan, Yun studied Western music in both Korea and Japan before World War II. During the War, Yun participated in the Korean independence movement, and was arrested and imprisoned for his activities. Yun then had a second period of study in Paris and Berlin in the 1950s, where he worked with the leading members of the post-War avant-garde. Yun settled in West Berlin, where he worked to establish cultural institutions in North Korea to further the cause of reunification. His reward for these efforts was to be kidnapped by the South Korean secret service, falsely accused of espionage, tortured and imprisoned for almost two years.

The Etude No. 5 for solo flute comes from a collection of five etudes for flutes of different sizes (the Etude No. 5 is for the "standard" flute, but there are also Etudes for piccolo, alto flute and bass flute). At this point of his compositional career, Yun constructed his music around what he called "main tones." These are held tones that serve as the basis for ornamentation, rather than as components of melodies or motives. The Etude No. 5 is relatively active and vigorous compared to the rest of the set, but it is still easy to hear the piece as a series of long notes that are embellished with rapid flourishes, trills and pitch bends. Structurally, there is some sense of a three-part form, with a middle section that is softer and slower than the surrounding material, but Yun cautioned that his music has neither beginning nor end. As he put it in a 1987 interview, "music flows in the cosmos, and I have an antenna which is able to cut out a piece of the stream. The part which I've cut out is organized and formed through my own thought and body processes, and I commit it to paper."

This idea of Western concert music being shaped by Taoist philosophy would be one example of a synthesis of Eastern and Western principles, as would be the many sound effects in the Etude that are reminiscent of the those produced by Korean traditional flutes, including wide vibrato and pitch bends. Other effects, including special fingerings that produce multiple tones at the same time and singing while playing, also evoke Korean traditional music. As the ethnomusicologist Robert Provine points out, the idea of Korean music clearly had great significance for Yun, but the instrumentation and structure of his compositions are essentially Western. Again, Yun provided a specific context, explaining that any combination of Eastern and Western in his music is a reflection of his own personal experiences, rather than of a conscious effort. In the same interview, he said "I'm a man living today, and within me is the Asia of the past combined with the Europe of today. My purpose is not an artificial connection, but I'm naturally convinced of the unity of these two elements. For that reason it's impossible to categorize my music as either European or Asian. I am exactly in the middle. That's my world and my independent entity."

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Otar Taktakishvili (1924-1989)
Sonata for Flute & Piano in C major (1968)

Otar Taktakishvili was the most prominent composer and cultural functionary of his generation from Soviet Georgia. At the time that he composed his Sonata for Flute and Piano in 1968 he was Minister of Culture of Georgia (a position that he held for almost three decades), and he had also taken leading roles in the Georgian Composers' Union, the Soviet Composers' Union, and the International Music Council of UNESCO. Taktakishvili's artistic and administrative career was a product of the intersection between Georgian history and Soviet policies towards national minorities.

Georgia was incorporated into the Russian Empire at the very beginning of the 19th century, and developed a European art music culture more-or-less in parallel with Russia in the second half of the century. This culture centered on Italian opera, with Russian operas added in from the 1880s and eventually operas by Georgian composers trained in St. Petersburg (amongst them Meliton Balanchivadze, father both of Shostakovich's friend and student Andria Balanchivadze and of the choreographer George Balanchine). In the early decades of the Soviet Union, the development of national culture in the non-Russian Republics was strongly encouraged. In the 1930s, Russian architects and composers were sent to Central Asia to build opera houses and compose "national operas," based on local folk music. Georgia was in a privileged position, already in possession of an opera house (the first opera house in Tbilisi opened in 1851, and the current imposing building was completed in 1896), a native opera tradition, concert halls, and a conservatory. Georgian culture also had the undeniable advantage of support from the Georgians Lavrentiy Beria and Joseph Stalin in the Politburo.

In terms of musical style, Stalin had decreed that Soviet culture should be "national in form and socialist in content" (apparently modifying a passage in The Communist Manifesto in which Marx and Engels stated that "though not in content, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat is at first a national struggle"). More specifically, in the 1930s, Soviet cultural figures were directed to conform to the notoriously poorly-defined category of Socialist Realism. In practice, this ended up promoting music in 19th century forms and characters, and, when coming from the non-Russian Republics, colored with folk music. Again, Georgia found itself ideally positioned, as this largely describes the art music that had been cultivated there since before the Revolution.

Taktakishvili, as part of the first generation of Georgian composers born in the Soviet Union, took advantage of these circumstances, receiving a conservatory education in Tbilisi, rising through the local and federal composers' unions and being awarded some of the disproportionate share of state prizes bestowed upon Georgian composers. His compositional output is quite extensive and spans all of the major genres, but he was particularly successful with operas, oratorios and symphonic song cycles on Georgian themes and with Georgian texts. Although it was composed long after Stalin's death, and well after Socialist Realism was an obligatory point of reference, Taktakishvili's Sonata for Flute and Piano is an excellent example of the winning formula that he had developed in earlier years. The Sonata's harmonic language follows Prokofiev's in being based in familiar chords, but with just enough piquant added tones and surprising juxtapositions to locate it firmly in the 20th century. The three movements have the tempos and characters conventional for sonatas since Mozart's day, with some exotic flavor to remind us that the composer is Georgian.

The first movement is based on two attractive themes, both presented by the flute. The first is high and lyrical, outlining a C major triad over a flow of eighth notes from the pianist's right hand. The contrasting theme is perkier, with short articulations and an almost Hadyn-like simplicity. After both themes have been stated and are then developed, we might expect a standard sonata-allegro form. Instead, Taktakishvili continues to play with the second theme and then surprises us with an entirely new (and quite lovely) theme in a distant key. There is eventually a recapitulation of the second theme, but the true return to C major has to wait for the very end of the movement, when the openings of both themes are played by the piano under repeated high Cs in the flute.

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The second movement is a haunting aria, with an expansive flute melody sung over pulsing quarter notes in the piano. This has been compared to the Rachmaninoff Vocalise, and it is easy to imagine this movement gaining the same status as a popular classic, or even as a movie theme. The movement is almost entirely gentle and quiet, only becoming more assertive and impassioned as it nears its close. The final movement is an utterly charming rondo. In keeping with the marking of "scherzando," the main theme is bouncy and playful, keeping the listener unsure of the meter.

The other theme is rhythmically straightforward and folk-like in style. If it isn't actual Georgian folk music, it certainly sounds as if it could be. Taktakishvili alternates between the high-spirited and artful rondo theme and the folksy contrasting idea until a lickety-split coda bring the Sonata to a conclusion.

Julia Gomelskaya (1964-2016)
The Hint Only…, for Solo Flute (2003)

Of the three composers on this program born in the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Julia Gomelskaya was by far the youngest. She received a full musical education in Soviet-era Ukraine, establishing herself as leading composer of her generation and as one of the first Ukrainian composers to work in electronic music. After the fall of the Soviet Union, she did a post-graduate course at the Guildhall School in London (according to her, "very intensive, and a great time"). Her career was very international, with major commissions for dramatic works from London-based organizations, and many vocal works in English. Gomelskaya and her husband Sergei were killed in a car crash in 2016, on their way to a concert celebrating one of her composition teachers.

"The Hint Only…" was commissioned by the flutist and contemporary music specialist Mario Caroli, and composed in 2003. At first, "The Hint Only…" might superficially resemble Yun's Etude in its use of long notes with pronounced vibrato, trills and bent pitches. "The Hint Only…," however, quickly reveals itself to be a significantly different work.

One difference is the prominent use of short, staccato notes; an articulation almost completely absent from the Yun. Another is that while the Yun is conceived as a continuous flow of music, Gomelskaya's piece features a dynamic relationship between foreground and background, featuring legato lyrical fragments as the primary material, with quieter tremolos as a secondary contrast. These tremolos function as an accompaniment although they are heard in alternation with the melodic fragments. There also strong motivic relationships between the fragments, with both "melody" and "accompaniment" repeating the same shapes and intervals. Finally, Yun eschews repetition, while Gomelskaya makes use of short patterns that are exactly replicated multiple times.

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Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)
Partita, Op. 2, for Piano (1958)

Arvo Pärt, following Valentin Silvestrov and Alfred Schnittke, is the last of the three Soviet composers from the so-called "Thaw Generation" whose works appear on this season's Camerata Pacifica programs. This generation started their professional careers after the death of Stalin, at a time when compositional experimentation was much more possible than it had been before.

The Partita is a very early work, composed near the beginning of Pärt's years studying at the Tallinn Conservatory in Estonia. It would be more than a decade before Pärt would establish his international reputation with a series of meditative works informed by his study of early music and a commitment to the Orthodox Church. The Partita comes from a very different sound world. The characters of the four short movements seem mostly connected to Baroque music, especially that of Johann Sebastian Bach. The first movement, labeled "toccatina," does, indeed, seem like a little Toccata, starting with rush of notes in a single line, rising up, breaking out into chords, and then dropping to the very bottom of the keyboard in the manner of an improvisatory flourish.

The second movement (which follows without pause) is a little fugue, reminiscent of a Bach two-part invention. The harmonic language of these movements, however, is anything but Baroque, marked by a spiky chromaticism and evading recognizable harmonies.

The third movement constitutes a turning point, shifting to soft chords that eventually settle on clear major triads. The final movement (again, following without pause) is built on an incessantly repeated four-note figure in the left hand that thunders out in the deepest bass at the conclusion.

By contemporary standards, the Partita seems like a witty and sardonic bit of neo-classicism, but the avoidance of conventional harmonies was enough to be problematic in the Soviet Union, even during the Thaw. The board of the Soviet Composers' Union met in December of 1958, specifically to discuss works by younger composers. Pärt's Partita was on a list of "non-recommended models," marked by "formalist experimentation." Later in the report, this was clarified as a neglect of "national-folkloric music" in favor of "modernist tendencies." "Formalist experimentation" was long-standing code for "modernist," and the Pärt Partita provides an obvious contrast to the folksy neo-classicism of the Taktakishvili, which was the epitome of the officially-approved style of the time. The Partita was officially disavowed, but did receive its premiere in 1958 over Estonian Radio, where Pärt worked as a sound engineer.

Libby Larsen (b. 1950)
Land

Land, commissioned in 2021 for Camerata Pacifica by Joan Davidson in memory of her husband John Schnittker, is a portrait in six movements for french horn, cello and piano. The circumstances of John Schnittker's life is the impetus for the character of the music, but I consider the whole of the piece to evoke a larger cultural arc - a certain time, sense of place and recognition of human beings in community - to which John Schnittker belonged and in which his life's work flourished.

In our initial conversations about what the music might be, Joan Davidson and Adrian Spence spoke eloquently about John Schnittker's life and encouraged me to learn from it and let what I learned inspire the music. Joan generously entrusted me with family memorabilia, including original photos of John's family farm in Kansas, written family anecdotes and stories, and writings and speeches John gave during his years of service in Government, including his work as Undersecretary of Agriculture to President Lyndon

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B. Johnson. As I was reading and thinking about these pieces of Mr. Schnittker's life, what began to emerge to me was a man whose feet, heart and soul were planted in the farmlands of Kansas. Though his life's work led him from boyhood on his family farm to study agricultural economics and then into politics and public service, it seemed to me that he was fueled by his passion for the beauty and bounty of farmland. John Schnittker knew the land – its smells, textures, horizons, complexities - in daylight and in dark.

To create the sense of a "certain time", I worked with diatonic musical language, white key if you will, to suggest an abstract association with a 1940's, 50's and 60's popular musical environment.

I hear the sound of white-key piano - white-key cluster chords, runs and interlocking textures - exuding an energy of no-nonsense optimism. To create a sense of place, I drew upon ideas of horizon lines, which in the Plains states can hold deep emotion, immersing one in infinity defined by subtle change. I created suggestions of lyrical lines and melodies for the horn and cello and let them flow into and out of each other.

Each of the six movements takes its title from the poetry of Hayden Carruth, a contemporary of John Schnittker. Hayden Carruth spent his boyhood on his family's farm in Vermont where his passion led him to try to protect the land with his words. I think there is a communion of spirit somewhere between these two men who lived at the same time, in the same country and, as boys, farmed the land.

Though I hope that each movement's title, wedded with its music, captures your unique ear and imagination and you take the music in as your own, I offer a few words about each movement:

1. … invisible stars singing*

The poem tells of a child, lying in a field of sweet, tall grass, undetected, listening to birds calling to each other across the expanse. Peace of mind.

2. …beyond plenitude**

The poem speaks of what exists just beyond the rim of our circle of consciousness, striving to be grasped but beautifully failing.

Listen to the silences for music inside them.

3. The Ravine***

The poem immerses one in a ravine. In cyclic time – in winter when snow fills it and in spring when snow melts again, the relationships of objects jumbled in the ravine shift many times.

We understand and are secure in the shifting. However in terms of geologic time, we can never know or understand the ravine. We can only encounter it.

Listen for your feelings of security when you know "where you are" in the music vs how you are feeling when the music seems incomprehensible.

4. …beautiful faces in the dark****

The poem tells of the poet, driving on a moonlit, misty night in the Vermont countryside, encountering cows who turn their "sad and beautiful faces" to him in the dark.

Listen for the beauty of simplicity.

Songs 5 and 6 are performed with no break

5. …we came to a solemn season*****

The poem speaks of late Autumn's stoic heraldry of frozen ground – the solemn season, when survival out of doors is precarious. Closing your eyes bathes you in Autumn's warm sun, taking you away from the urgency of survival.

6. …standing on the wagon tongue******

The poem uses the task of haying as a metaphor for humility in Human Being.

** (from The Sound)*

*** (from The Joy and Agony of Improvisation)*

**** The Ravine, the music of this movement is recomposed and incorporated from a previous work.*

***** (from The Cows at Night)*

****** (from November, Indian Summer)*

******* (from Emergency Haying)*

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