May 2023

by Derek Katz

John Adams (b. 1947)
Shaker Loops, for String Septet (1978, revised 1982)

"Minimalism," like most -isms, is a thorny term, and one that has been disavowed by its most notable putative practitioners. When asked to define minimalism, Steve Reich told an interviewer "I don't. I steer away from the whole thing." Philip Glass said that minimalism "doesn't describe the music that people are going to hear." John Adams allowed that he had once been placed in the minimalist camp, but didn't "think that's a helpful distinction any more." Despite all that, Adams's Shaker Loops is a piece that is – by the composer's own account – closely connected to Steve Reich's experiments and to the practices now known as minimalism.

The Reich works that fascinated Adams were those created with magnetic tape in the 1960s, like It's Gonna Rain and Come Out. These were created by splicing fragments of tape end-to-end to create loops that could repeat indefinitely. Reich combined multiple loops that would gradually shift out of phase, creating long works that mesmerized through barely perceptible changes. Reich then obtained similar effects by combing tape with live performers or having multiple instruments slide out of phase from each other (Violin Phase, for example). The point for Reich was to foreground process, and have the process by which the piece was created be perceptible to the listener.

The "Loops" in the title of Shaker Loops refer to Reich's tape loops. Adams's original idea was to use a string quartet to produce figures that would both imitate Reich's loops and evoke the kinds of waves formed by natural oscillations, like those found on the surface of a lake. Adams experimented with this idea with a student ensemble at the San Francisco Conservatory, expanding the ensemble to a septet, and adding the idea of shaking. In older British musical terminology, a "shake" refers to a trill or tremolo, and Shaker Loops is filled with "shakes" of this sort. Adams also suggested that "Shaker" can refer to the ecstatic religious practices of a New Hampshire Shaker colony that he remembered from his childhood.

Shaker Loops has four movements that are played without pause (although there is a brief gap between the first and second movements). An earlier version of the work was modular, with sections repeated indefinitely until a conductor signaled a move to the next one. The final version is completely notated, but there is still a sense of modular construction, and of moving from one sustained idea to another. The first movement is busy, with insistent repeated notes (the tremolo kind of shake) combined variously with two-note figures, isolated harmonics and held notes. The second movement is built from long sustained notes, with the shaking confined to vibrato and occasional trills. The third movement seems to continue these static textures, but introduces a note of individual subjectivity with a solo cello line. Although only moving back and forth through four pitches, this is a type of personal expression that is strikingly new in the piece. This subjectivity and expressivity spreads through the ensemble as the cellist is joined by the other cellist and by the violist, and the movement accelerates and gains sonic mass. A large climax with the entire ensemble playing repeated two-note figures fades into the final movement. Here the tremolo shakes of the opening return, but in a gentler texture.

May 2023

by Derek Katz

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Cantata, "Non sa che sia dolore," BWV 209 (after 1729)

Johann Sebastian Bach's cantata "Non sa che sia dolore" is a charming work, but also an anomalous and somewhat mysterious one. The overwhelming majority of Bach's over two hundred surviving cantatas are sacred works that were used as part of Lutheran church services. "Non sa che sia dolore" is not only a secular cantata, but one of only two Bach cantatas in Italian (and the other example is of dubious authenticity). The secular cantatas are either occasional works, honoring a specific individual, or miniature dramas featuring mythological or allegorical characters. It is simultaneously true that the secular cantatas represent Bach's closest approach to opera, and also that – apart from the texts - most of them are indistinguishable from the sacred cantatas. Bach frequently reused music from secular cantatas in sacred works, changing only the texts (in fact, he seems to have counted on getting extra value from one-off occasional works in this way)

"Non sa che sia dolore" is an occasional work, but the occasion is not known. The Italian text is anonymous. It contains two fragments from known Italian poems, but is not skillfully crafted and is probably not from a native speaker. The text does give some clues to the cantata's purpose, but even these are somewhat contradictory. The cantata is definitely a farewell cantata. Someone is leaving, and we are sad about it. But who, and why? The first aria suggest that the honoree is leaving on an ocean voyage to serve his country. Perhaps a youth off to military service? But the reference to Ansbach might refer to a Leipzig friend of Bach's from Ansbach who was a classical scholar. This friend left Leipzig in 1734, which would be a plausible time for the cantata to have been composed.

The cantata is scored for soprano, flute and strings and consists of an instrumental sinfonia and two recitative-aria pairs. The substantial sinfonia resembles a movement from a flute concerto, alternating an "orchestra" of the strings alone with a lighter texture of flute usually accompanied only by one violin and the continuo. It is in B minor, the same key as Bach's second orchestral suite, which is also for flute and strings. The opening motive is also strongly (if no doubt coincidentally) reminiscent of Bach's concerto for two violins. Like the arias that follow, the sinfonia is a three-part ABA, with an opening section repeated exactly after a shorter, contrasting middle section.

The first recitative discusses the sorrow of parting, made more serious by the use of sustained notes from the strings to accompany the voice. The following aria is the one that implies a young man leaving for military duty. The outer sections, in minor with the flute winding ornate runs around the melodies, continues the theme of sorrow. Bach takes advantage of the portions of the poem about duty and favorable winds to move to a more cheerful and affirmative major mode for the middle section. The second recitative, containing the reference to Ansbach, is shorter, and only accompanied by the continuo. The final aria inverts the emotional arc of the previous one, starting in a dance-like major as the poet enjoins us to do away with anxiety and dread. Inevitably, the middle section returns to the minor for contrast, although there is no compelling textual reason to do so.

This somewhat exaggerated emotional display for what was likely a relatively inconsequential occasion (professor gets new job, moves to new city) provides a stark contrast to the Pergolesi Salve Regina that follows, where sorrow is again a topic, but in a universal register.

May 2023

by Derek Katz

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736)
Salve Regina in C minor (1736)

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's short life and career was in many ways exemplary for a musician of his time and place. As a child, he received basic musical training and violin instruction both from the maestro di cappella of the local cathedral and from a public music master. His more serious training came at a conservatory in Naples. Naples was one of the first places in Europe where children could receive education in music outside of the Church, and Pergolesi's institution was typical in both training orphaned and indigent children and monetizing them by hiring them out as performers. Pergolesi paid his way through school and raised money for the conservatory as a violinist and choirboy. His exceedingly brief professional career, lasting only from 1732 until his death from tuberculosis in 1736, was spent as a maestro di cappella to two Italian nobleman, and produced almost entire sacred vocal music and opera. Pergolesi was a success during his lifetime, but he would be little more than a footnote in history books were it not for his enormous posthumous fame. Pergolesi's music was both published and widely performed later in the 18th century. In particular, his two comic operas spread throughout Europe, most famously triggering the "Quarrel of the Comic Actors" in Paris in the 1750s, a public debate that set Italian comic opera against French lyric tragedy. In general, Pergolesi's music was held up as an example of the grace and naturalness prized in the 18th century, and the sensitive musical characterizations of his comic operas lead directly to the opera buffa style made most famous by Mozart.

The Salve Regina in C minor is one of three settings of this text by Pergolesi. It seems to have been composed at the very end of his life, when he was already in very poor health. This would make it a companion piece to his Stabat Mater, another work devoted to the Virgin Mary, and the best-known of his non-operatic works.

The Salve Regina is a Medieval hymn to Mary, originally chanted by monks at evening prayers during part of the liturgical year and at feasts specifically devoted to Mary. By the 15th century, the Salve Regina had become part of services supported by lay religious organizations that hired musicians for more elaborate settings of the hymn. Pergolesi's extended treatment of the hymn for voice and strings is part of this tradition. Pergolesi sets each sentence of the hymn as a separate section, each in a different tempo and character. There is no hint of his operatic style here, but rather a predominantly somber tone that emphasizes human suffering over holy consolation.

The basic musical texture is that of a Baroque trio sonata, with the two violin lines weaving back and forth over an active bass line. The vocal part, rather than an independent part accompanied by the strings, doubles one of the violin lines throughout. This is especially audible at the beginning, when music first played by the strings alone is repeated with the voice adding text to the violin parts. The music becomes appropriately more declamatory for the second section, starting with the words "to thee we cry." The third section uses the full vocabulary of Baroque musical devices to depict grief, from sighing figures and prominent dissonances to dramatic downward leaps to illustrate the valley of tears from which those cries come. The word "tears" is granted a long melisma, quavering back and forth between two pitches. Even the next section, in which Mary turns her merciful eyes towards us, is in a stern and formal style. Only in the penultimate section, in which Jesus is mentioned for the first time, does the music turn to major, the rhythm become more swinging and the idea of solace become more tangible. The final invocation of Mary returns to the somber texture and character of the opening.