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by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 2, No. 2 (1794-95)

This piano sonata is the second one to be published by Beethoven, and comes from a set of three sonatas dedicated to Joseph Haydn (Beethoven had previously composed three piano sonatas in Bonn, before moving to Vienna, which remained unpublished during his lifetime). The standard narrative of Beethoven's life and works holds up these "early" compositions as continuing in the styles and genres established by Haydn and Mozart, but these three sonatas are in many ways quite different from the sonatas by those composers. This is partially a question of social function. Haydn and Mozart's keyboard sonatas were aimed mostly at amateur players, who would purchase the sheet music and play the works in their homes. Beethoven, although he also hoped to sell sheet music for private use, was more a creature of Vienna's aristocratic salons, and his sonatas were perhaps best suited for his own performances in private concerts in noble homes.

The Op. 2 sonatas were first heard in such a *soirée*, in the palace of Beethoven's patron Prince Karl Lichnowsky, with Beethoven at the keyboard and Haydn in the small audience. There are also records of Beethoven performing movements from Op. 2, No. 2 on mixed programs with other types of music. Not surprisingly, given that Beethoven was the great keyboard player of his time, even these first sonatas were daunting for the (mostly female) amateurs that were the commercial target audience. One such player (a certain Frau von Bernhard) reported that her teacher placed the freshly published music for the Op. 2 sonatas on her piano, saying "there are new things in them which the ladies do not wish to play, because they are incomprehensible and too difficult." Beethoven's relationship with Haydn was also somewhat fraught.

The dedication was no doubt a sincere tribute to his recent teacher, but the connection to the older and much more famous musician also worked to Beethoven's advantage in advertising the sonatas for sale, and he resisted the suggestion of identifying himself as Haydn's student on the title page.

Based on the openings of each movement of this sonata, Op. 2, No. 2 would appear to be something of a genial middle child in comparison to the more assertive siblings on either side. There are, however, many surprises and strong contrasts that belie the more innocuous beginnings. The first movement opens in an appropriately Haydnesque manner, with a perky theme constructed from a pair of short notes and a descending scale fragment. The elegant and civilized first section unexpectedly loses momentum and seems ready to grind to a halt before suddenly bursting into an agitated and yearning minor section. The second movement is slow, with stately chords over a walking bass. Beethoven's student Carl Czerny described this theme as being "in a religious character," and "chorale-like." Here the surprise comes at the end of the movement. After the chorale section has been heard twice, and the movement seems to be about to end, a powerful restatement of the chorale in minor briefly interrupts the proceedings before being negated with a whispered return of the major version, now decorated. The mere presence of the third movement scherzo is unexpected, as almost all keyboard sonatas had only three movements at this time. Beethoven used the terms "menuet" and "scherzo" somewhat interchangeably in his early works, and this charming and dance-like scherzo could just as well have been called a menuet.

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No stormy outbursts in the movement, but there is a brief, wistful minor passage in the second half of the scherzo, and the entire Trio is in the minor. The fourth and final movement is a graceful Rondo, whose theme is preceded by a flourish.

The sly humor of the movement comes from this gesture, which is more extended and elaborate with each appearance of the theme.

Thierry de Mey (b. 1956) ***Musique de Table* (1985)**

Camerata Pacifica audiences last experienced the work of Thierry de Mey in February 2022, at concerts that included his *Silence Must Be* for solo conductor. That piece was mostly silent, which only a little bit of body percussion enhancing the theatrical rhythmic choreography for the conductor. Although *Musique du Table* (Table Music) has a much larger sonic component, de Mey considers both pieces to be part of a larger project of music as gesture, in which rhythm is expressed as movement, rather than being conceived of as articulating divisions of time.

The title of the piece is a sly musical in-joke. In the seventeenth century, table music (or *Tafelmusik*, or *Banchetto musicale*) referred to music, generally of a light and diverting character, that accompanied table-based activities, like feasts or other meals. De Mey's tables, however, are actual tables (or, more precisely, tabletops that have been detached) that produce sound, rather than sites with a soundtrack. De Mey gives precise directions for methods for the three performers to interact with the tabletops, from sliding to flicking and tapping.

These techniques produce a range of sounds, and de Mey also provides instructions for hand gestures, with labels like "the typist" and "the windshield wipers." Even the page turns are precisely indicated. The visual element provided by the hand choreography is at least as important as the audible component, with the hands emphasized by dramatic lighting and the sounds amplified. De Mey describes the work as being both a piece for percussion and a "ballet for hands."

Although it is difficult to perceive, de Mey harkens back to the older meaning of "table music" by constructing this piece from different sections that refer to older musical forms. The easiest example to describe is a "fugato," in which each of the players does the same thing in turn. Each entrance is preceded by a page flip, which makes the imitation more visible and obvious. This is followed by a section based on the nineteenth-century social dance the Galop, in which dancers bounce like galloping horses. Here, the players bunch their fingers and strike the boards like horses' hooves.

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Kenji Bunch (b. 1973)

Transcontinental, for Violin and Percussion Quartet (2023)

Kenji Bunch's *Transcontinental*, for violin and percussion quartet, is a colorful piece that comes with both a message and a narrative program. The composition honors the Chinese workers who were largely responsible for the manual labor for the first transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869. Chinese laborers were brought to the United States to build the roadbeds, bridges and tunnels for the railroad, while being paid significantly less than white workers in skilled and supervisory positions. *Transcontinental* offers a corrective both to sanitized and more comfortable stories of the American West, and also to stereotypes about Asian men in American culture.

The piece is in three movements, played without pause. Each movement depicts a different time in the day of a Chinese labor camp, moving from the sun rising over the Sierra Nevada to a camp breakfast and a day of grueling labor. The percussionists play conventional orchestral instruments like triangle, glockenspiel and vibraphone, as well as using objects that are appropriate to the specific scenarios and instruments that suggest China. The calm of daybreak is evoked largely through soft chords and melodies on the vibraphone and glockenspiel, with some rhythmic energy and cultural associations provided by the temple blocks, wooden bells that originated in Asia (and that were often used to lend an exotic sound to early jazz).

New sounds for the camp breakfast are aptly added by mixing bowls, a teapot and a washboard. This section also features a Chinese nipple gong, and stones clicked against each other. The sound of the stones continues into the next movement, joined by gravel buckets and actual railroad spikes, which are struck with hammers as the long day of hard labor progresses.

While the percussionists are at least partially acting out the day's activities, the violinist is the piece's protagonist, expressing the feelings of the workers. Bunch is himself an accomplished violist, and the violin writing is very idiomatic. The violin part is mostly built from quick, expressive flourishes around long notes for the daybreak movement, with some rhythmic left hand plucking of an open string. The camp breakfast is much more active, marked by syncopated double stops. The intensity of the workday elicits rushing scales, sometimes in parallel fifths, and aggressive chords, with the violinist finally explicitly joining the work force at the very end.

Transcontinental was composed for the Taiwanese-American violinist Paul Huang, former principal violin of Camerata Pacifica, and co-commissioned by the Taiwan Philharmonic.

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Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Symphony No. 15 in A major, Op. 141 (1971)
Arranged for Piano Trio and Percussion by Viktor Derevianko (1972)

The last of Dmitri Shostakovich's fifteen symphonies is enigmatic, even in comparison to Shostakovich's other works, so many of which are fraught with questions of meaning, sincerity and political pressure. Some of the ambiguity comes from the different types of musical expression found within the symphony, which ranges from the sarcastic to the deeply felt. Additional questions are raised by Shostakovich's quotations from other works. There are clear references to famous pieces by Rossini and Wagner as well as possible nods to other compositions by Shostakovich. The biographical context can also point in different directions. Shostakovich had been in very poor health for some time when he composed the symphony, which was begun while he was in the hospital. Many performers and commentators hear the symphony as a valedictory farewell from a composer confronting death. It is also the case, however, that the medical treatments that Shostakovich was receiving had provided him a temporary respite from the worst of his symptoms, and that the symphony was composed at a time of relative optimism about a possible recovery.

The transcription for violin, cello, piano, celesta and percussion is by the Soviet pianist Viktor Derevianko, who played the symphony in a version for two pianos for the Union of Composers in 1971, a necessary step before Shostakovich could receive official approval for the orchestral premiere. Derevianko was at that first public performance, and was moved to transcribe it the next year, with the composer's approval, both to present it with his own piano trio, and to make it possible (as on these concerts) for the symphony to be heard in smaller halls and played by smaller ensembles. The transcription aims to preserve the

orchestral balances of the symphony, rather than to adapt itself to idiomatic writing for strings or piano. The large percussion section, which includes pitched instruments like xylophone, vibraphone and glockenspiel, is a very distinctive feature of the symphony and is retained verbatim. The percussion parts that you hear are the same as for the full orchestral score. The violin and cello, for the most part, play the music originally for the string sections. This is frequently very technically demanding, for instance with the violinist and cellist each asked to play long passages in parallel octaves to mimic the sound of two violin sections, or of violas and cellos. The piano generally plays the parts originally assigned to the woodwinds and brass (the opening piano melodies in the first movement are played by a flute followed by a bassoon in the orchestral version).

The first movement seems to harken back to Shostakovich's lively and somewhat snarky youthful works. The main theme is dancelike; perhaps a slightly off-kilter polka. An anapestic rhythm, typical both of Shostakovich and of polkas, unexpected leads to multiple statements of the main melody from Rossini's *William Tell* Overture (perhaps still familiar to some of us as the theme song from "The Lone Ranger"). This seems to mean something, but what? Is Shostakovich gently mocking his own fondness for that rhythm? Shostakovich did tell a journalist that this movement was like looking into a toyshop window, although one critic suggested that it must be a shop closed at night with the toys in a state of rebellion. This movement also has a long violin solo in the orchestral original, which may have also suggested this instrumentation for the transcription.

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The second movement seems to come from a completely different expressive world, without a trace of the sarcasm and humor of the preceding music. This is a lengthy and serious slow movement. Rich chords in the piano (brass in the original) introduce an extended and expressive cello solo (again, also a cello solo in the original) that rises up from the cello's lowest string to its upper reaches. The contrasting material is a somber march in the piano's lower register (trombone and tuba in the original). The next movement follows without pause and again is a complete change of character. The compact scherzo returns us to the world of wit and parody, with perhaps some hints of Mahler, especially in the violin solos. The percussion is more prominent in this movement, including a brief timpani solo and some longer stretches of unpitched chattering.

The final movement is perhaps the most difficult to parse. It opens with the "fate" motive from Wagner's Ring Cycle, followed immediately by the timpani playing the rhythm of Siegfried's Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung*, the final opera of that cycle. This is repeated, and then the piano plays what sounds like the beginning of the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which leads to...a wistful melody, very much in Shostakovich's style, and having nothing to do with Wagner. Again, what do we make of this? Are the Wagner quotes to be taken at face value as serious and ominous?

Or are they pretentious rather than portentous, with the Shostakovich melody deflating the Wagnerian self-importance? If this is something of a joke, what comes next is definitely not. A new section is ushered by repeated notes in the timpani, under which the piano plays a bass line that will be repeated over and over again as the basis of a passacaglia (and which is strongly reminiscent of the "invasion" theme from Shostakovich Symphony no. 7, composed in honor of the siege of Leningrad). The repetitions become increasingly intense as the textures thicken and the volume rises to a shattering climax, with the passacaglia theme pounded out in the timpani and the piano. This is the high point of the symphony, but not its end. The wistful melody returns, now in major, and fragments of the passacaglia theme and of the opening of the first movement are subsumed by a sort of magical music box effect created by the percussion section against long held notes from the strings and piano.