10-31-2011

Concert: The Bob Becker Ensemble

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The Bob Becker Ensemble

Bob Becker
Bill Cahn
Jamie Marie Jordan
Yurika Kimura
Christopher Norton
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Nabenhauer Recital Room
Monday, October 31, 2011
9:00 p.m.
Program


Turning Point (1993)  Bob Becker


Cryin' Time (1994)  Bob Becker


Mudra (1990)  Bob Becker
Notes

Prisoners of the Image Factory

Prisoners of the Image Factory is based on music originally composed in 1991 to accompany a short film by Toronto film maker James Stewart. The film, which was without dialogue, featured a teen-aged actor and actress portraying young lovers cavorting through a late-night cityscape. My intention was to create a miniature tone poem which reflected the ambiguities of adolescent relationships and the energy of an urban environment. Formally, the idea was to base the musical architecture on the very fast rhythmic cutting in the film. This was done by setting the tempo for the music at one beat per second and then marking all the time-coded edit points on a blank score. The result was a kind of reverse music video where the visual content and rhythmic structure preceded the musical piece. The music was expanded and reorchestrated during August, 1992 in response to a request by the Toronto new music ensemble ARRAYMUSIC for a short piece to feature two percussionists. This version is scored for vibraphone, marimba and piano.

Turning Point

Turning Point was composed for the NEXUS ensemble in January, 1993. It is scored for marimba, vibraphone, songbells, glockenspiel, crotales and piano. The title is a reference both to the dance-like imagery that was visualized for the piece, and to the continual use of chromatic trill figures in the music.

Unseen Child

Unseen Child is based on the song Mienai Kodomo written by Toru Takemitsu as the theme song for the 1963 Iwanami film Kanogo to Kare (She and He), directed by Susumi Hani. In my piece, Takemitsu’s original melody has been very freely altered, particularly its rhythm. The approach to harmony is also completely divorced from the pop-style chord progressions of the original song and is rigorously based on a system of four non-transposable nine tone scales that I have been using in my own compositions for the past ten years. The piece, written in March, 2002, is scored for glockenspiel, songbells, vibraphone, marimba and suspended cymbals. The lyrics to the original song are by Shuntaro Tanikawa, here translated into English by Ella Louise Rutledge and Kirsti Kaldro:
Unseen Child (Mienai Kodomo)

Unseen, a little child, someone’s child,  
hidden within, not yet born,  
laughing in the morning, laughing in the sun,  
when morning light arrives outside the window.

Unseen, a tiny walnut in its shell,  
green like the spring, not yet ripe,  
trembling as the night falls, trembling in the woods,  
when dark of night arrives, deep in the forest.

Unseen, a little child, my own child,  
who no longer will be born,  
singing in the morning, singing in the dawn,  
when morning light arrives, she flies across the sky.

Cryin’ Time

Cryin’ Time was composed during July/August, 1994 and is scored for  
vibraphone, marimba, piano and soprano solo. The lyrics were adapted from a  
poem by the distinguished Canadian artist Sandra Meigs. The poem, along  
with an elaborate series of oil paintings, formed an installation entitled Baby,  
first shown in June, 1994 at the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto. In its original  
form, the poem is a horrifying story that deals with the morbid fear of a young  
mother: She accidentally stumbles and drops her new baby into a deep river  
canyon. At the same time, the somewhat matter-of-fact narrative style gives the  
text something of the feeling of a “hurtin’” country/western love song. I  
wanted the musical piece to play even more on this ambiguity, which was the  
reason for “adapting” the text (done with the artist’s permission). I did this  
primarily by substituting the word “you” for “baby” or “the baby”, deleting a  
number of verses that didn’t maintain the love song concept, and, occasionally,  
contracting verbs and making minor changes in syntax to make the text more  
“singable”.

Cryin’ Time
(adapted by Bob Becker from the poem and painting Baby, 1994 by Sandra Meigs)

I was up inside the canyon when I saw your smilin’ face.  
Never plant the seed, if you’re expectin’ grace.  
Cryin’ time. It’s cryin’ time.  
Cryin’ time again.

In the rocks I see your face,  
but then a river floods the place.  
The rock’s so tall that I’m just nothin’.
Muddy water’s changin’ all I know.
Cryin’ time. It’s cryin’ time.
Cryin’ time again.

A rock so high nothin’ can climb it.
Not even a bird can fly to find it.
And down the cliffs to the river falls.
Risin’ water breakin’ through the walls.
And takin’ back all it left behind.
Takes it back, so I can’t find you.

With the drop of a hat
or a key down a grate,
I lost you like that,
through a slip of fate.
Cryin’ time. It’s cryin’ time.
Cryin’ time again.

I went to the river and thought I’d jump in.
Your smilin’ face stopped me. Again.
Smilin’ face, or cryin’ time.
It’s sure to make me feel alive.

Beyond the hill. Beneath the clock.
Beside my bed. On the canyon walk.
I know you won’t mind,
if it’s cryin’ time.
Cryin’ time. Cryin’ time again.

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**Never in Word**

*Never in Word* was composed in Toronto during July/August 1998. It is scored for soprano, piano, marimba, vibraphone, celesta or glockenspiel, and crotales. The lyrics are from a short poem by the American author Conrad Aiken. The poem itself is untitled, but appears as number eighty-three in an extended series of ninety-six poems under the collective title *TIME IN THE ROCK* or Preludes to Definition (first copyrighted in 1932 and published in 1953 by Oxford University Press).

The piece begins in a very fast tempo, which is maintained until the palindromic line in the second stanza: “time in change and change in time”, when the tempo shifts to a somewhat slower pace. Two places in the poem suggest extended musical development. The first is after the last line of the first stanza: “but music heard”. There is no punctuation following the word heard, even though the first word of the succeeding stanza is capitalized. It is as if the poet pauses here momentarily to listen, perhaps to some imagined music. This section of the piece is purely instrumental – the singer is tacet.
The second development occurs after the last line of the fifth stanza (the very end of the poem): “never in word”. This time the development includes vocalise – wordless singing. The piece ends with a return to the fast tempo and opening material, played by the instruments alone.

Music will more nimbly move
than quick wit can order word
words can point or speaking prove
but music heard

How with successions it can take
time in change and change in time
and all reorder, all remake
with no recourse to rhyme!

Let us in joy, let us in love,
surrender speech to music, tell
what music so much more can prove
nor talking say so well:

Love with delight may move away
Love with delight may forward come
Or else will hesitate and stay
finger at lip, at home,

But verse can never say these things;
only in music may be heard
the subtle touching of such strings,
never in word

Mudra

Mudra consists of music originally composed to accompany the dance UrbhanaMudra by Canadian choreographer Joan Phillips. Commissioned by INDE ‘90 and premiered in Toronto in March, 1990 as part of the DuMaurier Quay Works series, UrbhanaMudra was awarded the National Arts Centre Award for best collaboration between composer and choreographer. The music was subsequently edited and reorchestrated as a concert piece for NEXUS during May, 1990. Mudra is scored for marimba, vibraphone, songbells, glockenspiel, crotales, muffled drum and bass drum. UrbhanaMudra was created, for the most part, using the “dance first” approach, in which the music is composed to fit pre-existing choreography. Thus, the rhythmic structure and overall form reflect the episodic and gestural character of the original choreography, which dealt with the conflict of traditional and modern issues in a multi-cultural urban society. The term mudra refers in general to the narrative use of torso, facial and hand and arm gestures in many Indian dance forms. The
instrumental ensemble in the original piece had a role similar to that found in traditional Indian dance concerts, where a solo drum is the principal voice. However, western instruments were not used to imitate an “Indian” sound. In response to the choreographic approach, classical Indian musical structures were allowed to influence the formal, rhythmic and harmonic aspects of the music. The interval relationships of the pentatonic raga Chandrakauns (tonic, minor third, fourth, minor sixth, major seventh) were used to determine both the melodic and harmonic content, while rhythmically, Mudra is based on two important and common structures found throughout North Indian music: 1) motivic development (palta) and 2) rhythmic cadence formulas (ti hai). These structural devices are used most systemically in the final drum solo section of the piece in which rhythmic, rather than harmonic cadencing is used to create tension and, ultimately, accord.

About the music

The musical language used in the pieces on tonight’s program has been evolving in my music since as long ago as 1982 with Palta, a kind of concerto for the Indian tabla drums, accompanied by traditional western percussion instruments. The approach became explicit in 1990 with Mudra, where the idea was to extract a functional harmony from a purely melodic source: specific ragas of Hindustani classical music. (The term raga was once succinctly defined by musicologist Harold S. Powers as “a generalized scale, a particularized mode”, although Indian musicians usually give the word a more poetic meaning: “that which colours the mind”.) Even though Indian music is generally characterized as being elaborately melodic with no harmony (by western European definitions) whatsoever, my personal experience has always been one of subliminally perceived harmonic movement, a sensation that is clearly related to my cultural background and musical training. This kind of cross-referencing is always experienced when one strong cultural expression encounters another and, in my opinion, this perceptual phenomenon will be the defining issue in all of the arts and politics of the twenty-first century. Musically, I have found this effect to be most pronounced in ragas containing relatively few tones. The pentatonic modes containing no fifth scale degree (for example, the ragas Malkauns, Chandrakauns and others) have, to my ear, the most ambiguous and intriguing harmonic implications. Raga Chandrakauns, traditionally linked to the full moon and late-night hours and with the scale degrees tonic, minor third, fourth, minor sixth, major seventh, has always attracted me. I have applied a variety of compositional and mathematical devices to these interval relationships to determine both the melodic and harmonic content of all of my music for the past twelve years. Most recently, I have used a matrix of four non-transposable nine tone scales to derive the same interval relationships, resulting in a further expanded harmonic landscape. In 1971 the Montréal poet Louis Dudek wrote the following short but penetrating verse, which seems to go to the heart of this method of working:

We make our freedom in the laws we make,
And they contain us as the laws we break
Contained a remnant of an ancient music
That a new music in its laws contains.

Notes by Bob Becker
Upcoming Events

November

1 - Ford - 8:15pm - Guest Concert: New Jersey Youth Symphony Percussion Ensemble
3 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Flute Ensemble
4 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Faculty Recital: Nathan Hess, piano
4 - Ford - 8:15pm - Concert Band and Jazz Vocal Ensemble (Family Weekend)
5 - Ford - 8:15pm - Symphonic Band/Jazz Ensemble (Family Weekend)
6 - Ford - 1:30pm - Choral Concert (Family Weekend)
7 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Ithaca Brass
7 - Ford - 9:00pm - Faculty & Guest Recital: Gordon Stout and Adam Blackstock, marimba
8 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Faculty Showcase Recital
10 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Susan Waterbury, Nicholas DiEugenio, & students, violin
11 - Hockett - 2:00pm - Rachel S. Thaler Concert Pianist Series Masterclass: Christopher O’Riley, piano
11 - Ford - 8:15pm - Rachel S. Thaler Concert Pianist Series: Christopher O’Riley, piano
12 - Ford - 7:00pm - Choral Composition Festival Closing Concert
14 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Composition Premieres II
14 - Hockett - 9:00pm - Faculty Recital: Jeff Gray, bass trombone and Harold Reynolds, tenor trombone
15 - Ford - 8:15pm - Trombone Troupe and Brass Choir
16 - Hockett - 8:15pm - Opera Workshop
17 - Hockett - 7:00pm - Ithaca Wind Quintet
29 - Hockett - 8:15pm - Contemporary Chamber Ensemble
30 - Ford - 7:00pm - Sinfonietta
30 - Hockett - 8:15pm - Jazz Vocal Ensemble