November 2022

by Derek Katz

Emma O'Halloran (b. 1985)
***how sweet the thought of you as infinite*, for Solo Marimba and Live Electronics**

Emma O'Halloran's *how sweet the thought of you as infinite* combines marimba with electronics. Christopher Cerrone's *Double Happiness*, which ends this program, also uses pre-recorded sounds to create a dialogue between live performance and found artifacts, as well as between different locations. However, O'Halloran uses electronics for very different ends by processing the sounds made by the marimba in real time and creating a sort of "super-marimba" capable of more than a single human player. All of the sounds are marimba sounds, but the source can be difficult to perceive in the moment.

According to the composer, *how sweet the thought of you as infinite* was composed during a time of change and flux (presumably immediately pre-pandemic.) The piece reflects her own desire to preserve moments in time by freezing them and, "is about the longing that we have for certain moments to last forever." O'Halloran also describes the piece as, "a love letter to the special people in our lives."

The idea of using music, which constantly moves through time, as a way of freezing and fixing the moment can seem paradoxical. *how sweet the thought of you as infinite* is divided roughly in the middle into two halves, each with a different strategy for slowing time. The first half uses the electronics to sustain chains of repeated notes, with the constant flow of sounds constituting a type of stasis. The second half finds the marimbist playing shorter, more isolated gestures, and the electronics provide a kind of decaying echo emphasizing the ephemerality of sound.

Caroline Shaw (b. 1982)
***Gustave Le Gray*, for Solo Piano**

Caroline Shaw's *Gustave Le Gray* is a multi-sensory dual portrait. Gustave le Gray was the most important French photographer of the second half of the 19th century when the form was aspiring to the cultural and aesthetic status of painting. Le Gray was particularly known for a process in which photographic negatives were waxed before being exposed, yielding crisper images. Shaw references this technical innovation at the head of her score where she gives the indication, "like a photograph slowly developing on waxed paper." The musical photograph that develops turns out to be one of Chopin's Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 17, No. 4 (also heard on this program.) Shaw quotes a few bars from the opening (or ending) of Chopin's Mazurka in the middle of the piece, giving the performer the option of playing some or all of Chopin's original at that point. (Amy Yang, for whom the piece was composed, plays the full Mazurka in her recorded performances.) The idea of a developing photograph is made even more explicit in the published sheet music where the material quoted from Chopin is pasted in from a fuzzy photocopy.

Like much of Shaw's music, *Gustave Le Gray* is modular, made up of discrete sections that are different from each other but very internally consistent. The opening modules are most obviously connected to the undeveloped Chopin Mazurka with the first one riffing on the dreamy, repeated figure that opens the Chopin and the second marked by insistent repeated notes in the right hand taken directly from one of Chopin's ornamental figures. After the Chopin quote in the middle, the next section is more distantly reminiscent of the rustic bagpipe drones in the middle of the Mazurka.

Shaw describes the difference between her compositional methods and Chopin's in terms of food. Shaw says that her own music is like sashimi made up of "raw, unadorned" chords and ideas, while Chopin is a chef blending and transforming flavors. These musical modules are Shaw's exquisite slices of raw fish, allowing us to luxuriate in a small collection of rhythms and harmonies. In addition to these ideas of sight and taste, Shaw's score also contains similes from the world of textiles. The repeated notes lifted from Chopin are "like an expensive Hermès silk cravat," the penultimate module is a "linen hymn," and the final melody is "like the fragmented hem of a song from a long time ago." Shaw's musical world in which songs have hems and sounds can evoke the visual, gustatory, and tactile, is a world in which the priority is experiencing the sensual qualities of sound in the moment.

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Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42

Sergei Rachmaninoff's career can be roughly split into two parts. The first was spent in pre-revolutionary Russia and was his most productive time as a composer. The second part found him in exile, based in New York, with summers in France and Switzerland. During his émigré years, he had to support himself as a touring performer and composed relatively little. The Variations on a Theme of Corelli was his last work for solo piano and the only such work that he composed after leaving Russia. The Variations were composed in the summer of 1931 at a newly built villa in Switzerland, on the banks of Lake Lucerne, where Rachmaninoff both appreciated the solace of quiet nature and enjoyed operating a speedboat.

The Variations are on a theme that was used by Corelli but not actually composed by him. The last of Corelli's violin sonatas consists of a set of variations on a melody and chord pattern called the "Folia." References to a dance from Portugal and Spain called the Folia go back to the 15th century but the stately theme used by Corelli was established in the late 17th century as a basis for dances, songs, improvisations, and published variation sets. Although musically different from the earlier dances, the Folia retained its association with Spain (Liszt, for instance, used it in his Spanish Rhapsody.)

Other sets from the time include examples by Vivaldi, C.P.E. Bach, and Marin Marias, but the Corelli sonata is by far the most famous. An arrangement of the sonata by Hubert Léonard was in the repertoire of all concert violinists in the early 20th century, including Rachmaninoff's friend and collaborator Fritz Kreisler, to whom the Variations are dedicated.

There are 23 variations in the Rachmaninoff set and all are quite short. The theme is initially stated quietly, in the style of Corelli, but quickly becomes syncopated and jazzy (Rachmaninoff was a big Art Tatum fan.) Although the variations shift character frequently, and the melody comes and goes, there is a larger structure articulated by a rhythmically free Intermezzo that serves as an introduction to Variation 14 which returns to the opening slow theme, reharmonized in the major. The following Variation is also slow and flowing. These three sections provide a kind of slow movement in the center of the piece. Variation 17 might hint at a Spanish flavor, with guitar figurations for the pianist's left hand. The set ends with a ruminative coda.

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Joseph Schwantner (b. 1943)
***Velocities* (Moto Perpetuo for Solo Marimba)**

Born, raised, and trained in the Chicago area, Joseph Schwantner's career has followed a path in some ways typical for an American composer of his generation. Initially brought to music by playing in multiple traditions (jazz and folk music), he then received academic training and established himself in university and conservatory positions while writing music that used the techniques of serial (or twelve-tone) composition to organize pitches. As early as the 1970s, Schwantner became very interested in the possibilities of tone color. He also began working more closely with musical organizations outside of the contemporary music world, especially the St. Louis Symphony for whom he was the composer-in-residence in the early 1980s. Schwantner has written extensively for percussion, including a very successful Percussion Concerto from 1995.

Although now over thirty years old, *Velocities* is typical of Schwantner's more recent work. Immediately attractive and compelling, it is flexible, varied in timbre, and tinged with elements of minimalism with small and rhythmically propulsive figures repeated to form patches of consistent sound. As can be guessed from the title, *Velocities* is a piece of very rapid perpetual motion. Volume levels and textures change but the forward motion is inexorable. Although the marimbist holds two mallets in each hand, for most of the piece only a single bar is being struck at any given time. According to the composer, the piece is divided into three main sections. The first uses dry sounds produced by striking the edges of the bars with the wood of the mallets and flowing passages marked as "wavelike." The middle section is distinguished by the rare moments in which we hear multiple notes at the same time, creating thicker textures. The clicks and waves return for the final section, which end with a passage marked both "brutal" and "as fast as possible."

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)
Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 17, No. 4

At first blush, the idea that the genre of the mazurka provides a link between Chopin and folk culture seems almost too obvious to discuss. Not only is the mazurka a Polish folk dance and Chopin a Polish composer, but the mazurka has its origins in the Mazovia region (near Warsaw) where Chopin spent his childhood. The mazurka was a potent symbol of Chopin's Polish identity for the Parisians during his lifetime and Chopin's reception has continued to emphasize this connection. Movies about Chopin's life feature scenes in which he is inspired to compose a mazurka after overhearing folk musicians play, and there is even a recording in which hypothetical folk originals are reverse-engineered from his mazurkas and played on folk instruments.

Of course, it is a little more complicated than that. The mazurka had moved out of folk culture to become part of the world of European aristocracy and high culture long before Chopin's birth. The mazurka was a popular social dance in courts in Poland, Germany, and Russia by the early 18th century and was fashionable in Paris before Chopin arrived there. His mazurkas are perhaps better understood as stylized salon music meeting a Parisian desire for an exotic alternative to the waltz than as an expression of Polish folk culture.

The Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 17, No. 4 is from Chopin's early years in Paris and is one of the mazurkas that seem the least connected to folk dance models. The Mazurka opens with dreamy, harmonically ambiguous chords, and the lyrical melody spins out over pulsing, even quarter notes rather than being shaped by dance rhythms. The heavily embellished melody seems to come from the worlds of the nocturne (and of bel canto opera) rather than from a peasant dance band. Aside from a brief excursion in the opening section, only the major middle portion makes serious nods to the folk mazurka with a tune in a mazurka rhythm (short-short, long-long) over a bagpipe drone in the left hand. These moments stand out as exceptional digressions from the prevailing texture.

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Christopher Cerrone (b. 1984)
***Double Happiness*, for Piano, Percussion and Electronics**

I. Self-Portrait, Part 1
II. Interlude
III. Self-Portrait, Part II
IV. Interlude
V. New Year's Song (For Sarah)

Christopher Cerrone's *Double Happiness* was originally composed for electric guitar, percussion, and electronics in 2013. Cerrone reconceived the work with piano as part of a "piano-centric" project of intimate chamber works collected on his album *The Arching Path*. The album also contains *Hoyt-Schermerhorn*, which was heard on last February's Camerata Pacifica program. Like *Hoyt-Schermerhorn*, *Double Happiness* is a piece with a strong sense of place, and one that overtly reflects the composer's personal experiences. In the case of Double Happiness, the place is Italy, and the experiences contain both the recent history of Cerrone's proudly Italian-American family and also a summer spent on a fellowship in a castle in Umbria. The electronic component of *Double Happiness* contains field recordings of rainstorms, church bells, and train stations made by Cerrone during that particular summer.

Double Happiness is comprised of five sections, with three main movements (each a little over three minutes long), separated by two brief Interludes (each about a minute long.) The first section, "Self-Portrait, Part 1," is based on a repeated series of four notes played by vibraphone and piano harmonics (with the pianist touching the strings as the keys are struck.) Cerrone describes these notes as "obsessive in their melancholy." The first Interlude interrupts this obsession with a recording of an Umbrian rainstorm over which the piano plays slow chords and the vibraphone imitates church bells. The middle section, "Self-Portrait, Part 2," is joyfully ecstatic (a feeling, the composer notes, that can be just as obsessive as melancholy), with a recorded train station bell, rapid repeated notes in the vibraphone, and the chiming of antique cymbals. The second Interlude is very similar to the first and the final section is a simple song that mediates between the emotional extremes of the Self-Portraits. The piece ends with the recorded sounds of Cerrone himself playing the violin and the accordion. Although Cerrone is a pianist, not a violinist or an accordionist, these are instruments from Italy that have been passed down as heirlooms in his family. Cerrone has not explained the piece's title but there are many possible "doubles" connected to the piece, from the two performers to the two Self-Portraits and to his family history in Italy and in America.