

## CONDUCTOR'S NOTE

The rains of winter have arrived, but it's the inclemency of our current political and cultural situation that has me down.

Somewhere between the ascension of science in the late Renaissance (where facts came to mean everything) and the political landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (where they seem to mean nearly nothing) we've lost track of the role of music as a divining rod for the truth. Yet at critical times—many of which took place within our lifetimes—music has played just this role, of revelation and illumination.

Think of the importance of European modernism after World War II, in which the cool logic of serial composition was a balm to the unhinged excesses of the Third Reich. Or think of the founding in the mid-1960's of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and what it meant for those extraordinary African-American musicians whose voices had been suppressed in the mainstream. Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening Institute embraced silence and patience and helped make an increasingly chaotic and impatient world more bearable. (God, how losing Pauline at the end of November was the final punch in the guts of just an awful month!) Finally, in what for me was the greatest musical moment of the recent past, my president fought back tears and sang a mournful *Amazing Grace* to the memories of nine slain members of a Charleston church.

All of these artists show us music as the language of resistance, as the vessel of loss, of hope, of rage. This is music at its richest and most complex, grappling with life's insults and perplexities.

We'll hear that richness again in today's concert. Rossini's Overture to the Barber of Seville and the Beethoven Violin Concerto were just two among many products of the acute political and social discomfort in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Pierre Beaumarchais, the librettist of "Il Barbieri," (along with *The Marriage of Figaro*), fomented democratic revolution in Paris and encouraged French support of the American colonists in the Revolutionary War, and, in 1777, organized a shipment of military equipment, which aided the decisive victory at Saratoga. Though Beethoven was a true child of French revolutionary fervor, by the time he wrote his Violin Concerto he was looking beyond the strictures of classicism toward a more individual and expressive musical language. The concerto is

expansive—running a quarter of an hour longer than the classical norm—and demands an extraordinary, very personal, kind of virtuosity from the soloist. It was neither the first nor the last time that the collective sacrifice of one generation paved the way for the delicate, subjective musings of the subsequent one.

Luciano Berio's magnificent, hallucinogenic *Sinfonia*—part musical masterpiece, part post-modern cross-examination of the modern psyche—was created in the immediate aftermath of the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. In the second movement of *Sinfonia*, "O King," the eight solo voices gradually assemble the phonemes of "Martin Luther King." The moment when the great name is sung, complete and unmasked, is one of the most powerful musical phrases of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Sinfonia's* psychedelic third movement, a pastiche of musical quotations from Mahler, Berg, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Beethoven, along with textual quotations from the anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, is diverting and energizing. But unlike Ives, whose quilt of quotations always feels childlike and anticipatory—a musical version of the circus coming to town—Berio's fractured view of the past carries the sting of longing and loss. As the tangible and comforting past recedes, two questions hang in the air: How did we get here? What do we do now?

They're good questions, and I am not the only one who has asked them again recently. For a musician the answer can feel maddeningly simple. We will continue—doing our best to create powerful, complex musical experiences that illuminate and interrogate our current lives. But is that enough in this frightening time?

Don't underestimate music. The language of music alone is cause for hope. There are musical terms for passion, action, sadness, and a long list of phrases for togetherness: ensemble, *tutti*, and even the word concert itself. But nowhere in the musical lexicon will you find the hateful language we have heard recently. No musical phrase is marked with the slurs of predatory sexism and you'll never find an Italian formulation that means "Muslims stay out." Search any library of musical scores and you'll come up empty when it comes to terminology for condescension, homophobia, and bigotry.

This is a moment to lean on music—for its language of inclusion, passion, and resistance and for its power to illuminate life.

I have related the following story in this space before, but please indulge me again. It continues to be relevant.

In June of 1988, I was on a concert tour of Eastern Europe, having just arrived in Poland from Moscow (where I saw Reagan and Gorbachev together on Red Square.) I found myself sitting down with the American composer Kenneth Gaburo to a post-concert midnight meal in the small Warsaw apartment of Józef Patkowski. Patkowski had been chairman of the Polish Composers' Union through the darkest days of the Soviet occupation of his country and, more than any single individual, was responsible for his country's lively contemporary music scene, in spite of repeated attempts by the government to thwart it.

The enormous storm clouds of political upheaval that were just beginning to gather on horizons all over Eastern Europe that summer were ominously mirrored by flashes of real lightning clearly visible through Patkowski's window. I sat quietly as Józef and Kenneth talked about contemporary music in Poland and how an uncompromising Polish avant-garde gave Poles a real voice even when all other freedoms of expression had been strangled. I was stunned, and still am when I think about it, by the way music—yes, thorny and complex contemporary music—was being used in Poland to promote freedom and to argue for the common good.

There was a pause in the conversation as the storm approached and the thunder rolled. It was an extraordinary moment for me, the first time I realized that my job as a musician was not to enshrine the past but to lend a hand in the creation of a common good.

Patkowski suddenly slapped his hand on the table. The food was ready he said. Let's talk about life now, not art! Then he threw his head back and laughed as though such distinctions were absurd. And the rains came.

-Steven Schick