

STEVEN SCHICK: Conductor's Note
December 2012

I remember a March day of my childhood as I watched my father walk out onto a field of black Iowa earth, look around with his hands on his hips, sniff the warming spring air, and decide that it was time to plant. His decision was an act of trust in nature, of virtuosic improvisation in the realm of business. It was a yearly ritual of creating order and productiveness out of the chaos of possibility. By choosing to plant, my father took sides in the ageless disputation between wilderness and cultivation. His son, the musician, thinks in terms of noise and ritual. Either way, father and son confront one of the overriding questions of their lives. How do we encounter the uncontrolled and irrational – the “other” – in our lives? What tools do we use to understand it and how do we rephrase it in a language of custom and tradition?

It's not only in the realms of music and farming that the dichotomy between noise and ritual, chaos and order, has leverage. I love baseball and like football. Every significant moment in those two sports has been signposted by the quick alternation between ritualized action and a spontaneous explosion of noise. (If you saw the end of game six of the World Series this year then I rest my case.) Elsewhere: the trauma of childbirth – certainly this must be a noisy experience if you're the one being born – is followed quickly by the potentially confusing ritual of a quick spank and parental adoration. Even in the social sphere of a concert, the noise of applause is to be answered by the ritual of tuning.

The presence of noise is how we know we are someplace interesting, and ritual is how we make sense of that place.

To explore this question we partner two pairs of works: one made mostly of noise and another that seeks to understand it through ritual. With David Lang's *Grind to a Halt*, a raucous piece even for the composer of such gritty music as *The Anvil Chorus* and *International Business Machine*, we find the noise of creation. Building things always makes noise and David Lang's musical language could be uniquely summarized by the word “construction.” He builds one rhythmic cycle on top of another, eventually confusing the ear and creating, well, noise. Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana* is our riposte. It is not a constructed, but rather a “natural” ritual in the vein of the Bach “Passions” but where there is “the accordance of dignity and rightness to a natural as opposed to a civilised state,” in the words of Paul Griffiths. Nestled in Bartók's middle period among the late string quartets, the first performance of the *Miraculous Mandarin*, and the composition of

Music for Strings Percussion and Celeste the *Cantata* seems designed as a work that bridges Bartòk's profile as a composer of concert music to the pull he felt towards "more primitive" influences among the folk musics of central and eastern Europe. The *Cantata* is Bartòk's own ritual in order to understand the turbulence of his inner creative world.

Our second half reprises the pattern, starting with another Hungarian composer of progressive tendencies, this time György Ligeti, and moving to a stylized ritual in *Les Noces* of Igor Stravinsky. Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique* is a piece more often talked about than experienced. But experience it you will! One hundred metronomes set to prescribed speeds are wound and then released, creating a cacophony of noise that results, as the metronomes wind down, in a fascinating polyrhythmic array of clicking that eventually thins to silence. We link it here without pause to *Les Noces*, Stravinsky's ritualized version of a Russian wedding. In *Les Noces* we are very pleased to welcome back our friends, the Tijuana dance troupe "Lux Boreal" with choreography by Allyson Green.

And so we seek to understand our world through opposing compass points. But not so fast: when we actually confront noise and ritual they seem more similar than contrary. The noisiness of *Grind to a Halt* is a latticework of rhythmic overlay – in many ways as sophisticated a structure as the Bartòk that follows it. And Ligeti, for all the hubbub he creates on stage, rightly calls his piece a "poem." There is something questing and melancholy about hearing the machines we've made wind down and shed their utility. So, there is order embedded in noise. And, conversely, if the *Canata Profana* and *Les Noces* are any examples, our rituals can be pretty boisterous.

Isn't it marvelous? That opposing forces might in fact be different forms of the same basic stuff. That noise can be the source of art – the breath of the world as John Luther Adams calls it. That the memory of a farmer standing on his bare field would turn out to be the abiding poetic image of my life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Steven Schick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'S'.