

MOSKOWITZ
GALLERY

A concert series by
Music Director Eric Lamm

tragedy
optimism
and
youth

November 2013

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The pre-concert talk is given by Eric
Lamm,
Director of Music at Moskowitz Gallery.

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Beethoven Piano Sonata No. 23, Op. 57 'Appassionata'
Brendan White, Piano

Webern String Quartet (1905)
Hexagon Quartet

tragedy, optimism, and youth angst in the arts

“What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music.”

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

The concerts of tragedy, optimism, and youth are devoted to examining a certain sentiment often found in the work of young artists. All the visual artists exhibited in the gallery and all the musicians in these concerts are under the age of thirty. Anton Webern, who will be presented on the second concert, was around the age of Julia Easterlin when he wrote his String Quartet. Beethoven had just turned thirty when he wrote his Appassionata Sonata, but the work is exemplary of the sentiment at hand. This sentiment concerns a sort of ironic relationship between happiness and sadness, between constructive behavior and destructive behavior. It seeks optimism from a source of tragedy; it seeks to find sadness in humor; it seeks to find the point at which the extreme polarities of emotion can exist together.

There is no satisfactory word in English to describe this paradoxical frame of mind. The closest thing we have is the word angst, introduced from Danish by the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. This word has been translated as ‘anxiety,’ but there is a distinct difference between angst and anxiety: Angst is only applicable to a sort of spiritual anxiety. We do not feel it when we have a bad breakup, or when we lose a lot of money. Rather it is a sort of dissonant relationship to the world, a crisis of faith. A crisis of faith cannot easily be rem-

edied. As we all know, believing in something is not as simple as telling yourself it is true. Faith is something that we cannot prove, and so by definition it is just a belief in something we hope is true. Kierkegaard believed that we can only be moved to take a leap of faith once we are sure there is no better option. In other words, once angst becomes so prevalent in us, we have no other option but to jump.

If we all begin our spiritual lives in angst, it is understandable it would be common coin in art. But the relationship between artist and angst is a very special one. If an artist is a good one, they will have developed a particularly lucid relationship with their own psyche, and will probably be able to find the root of their angst. Since they understand themselves so well, it makes taking the leap of faith all the more difficult. If the artist is not to be crushed by the weight of their own inner turmoil, they must find a way to come to terms with it. All of the art created during the artist's tempestuous period will bear witness to the way in which they do so. Moreover, each art form (painting, writing, music, etc.), has distinct ways in which the concept of angst can be dealt with. Writing is perhaps the most straightforward, painting second, and music last, by way of its abstract nature.

Since images are not as descriptive as words, the painter must find a way of expressing the intangible concept of angst in the form of an image. Here in the gallery, the work of Alexa Guariglia and Bill Maass bear very distinct representations of the concept of angst. The human mind dreams in symbolic images, and Alexa's paintings function similarly. In her work we find a sort of twisted sexuality, a nightmarish eroticism. Through this we find not a definition of angst, but rather what it feels like to her, a conflation of beauty and the grotesque, of life and death. In the work of Bill Maas we see faces - faces which do not express pain themselves, but are drawn in a distorted way, as if it is not the subject that is angst ridden but the owner of the hand, the artist himself.

Is it not strange that we can find this beautiful? Angst is not a thing of classical beauty, it is a subjective experience of a stormy spirit. I would suggest that in the hands of lesser artists, a depiction of angst comes across as genuinely ugly. But under the control of a talented aesthete, one who can find beauty in anything, we can find something genuinely moving out of their depiction of angst. Perhaps this is why great art which concerns itself with this feeling, and

even more broadly, all tragic art, is valued. By finding beauty in our darkest moments, we have the courage to deal with them. At the same moment that we sympathize with an artist in the throws of angst, it is as if they are sympathizing with us.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Of all the music ever written, the works of Ludwig van Beethoven may be the most dramatic. This is not to say his music is the most evocative, rather that it comes closest of all to representing the literary drama. His music tells stories. His works do not progress from one pretty melody to another. Instead, we find his music organized into a coherent whole; each entire piece stands as one monumental idea which is only fully realized at the conclusion. Beethoven used music as a language. He brought the expressive power of music from the immediately sensual to the realm of higher idea.

The most obvious expressive powers of music lie in its immediacy. In the sonic world of music we find sound at its most sensual, its most erotic. We relish in the intertwining of sonic bodies; we are impelled to experience our own fleshly sultriness by insistent rhythms. Surely music on the smallest temporal scale is a hedonistic pleasure. If music on this order can be likened to poetry, then Beethoven is a musical novelist. The 'immediate' in Beethoven's music is comparatively dry, as a novelist eschews the pleasures of metric structure and rhyme to portray larger ideas. Perhaps he felt it necessary to dial down this pleasure to focus on the grandest scale of musical thought; although, one cannot help to wonder if it is because his deafness cut him off from the world of immediate sonic sensuality.

Whatever the case, Beethoven was only concerned with the highest order of music's expressive powers. If Beethoven dealt with sexuality, then it is only for the enormity of the feelings which accompany it. If he dealt with suffering, then it is suffering on the order of highest tragedy. Beethoven's vision was certainly grand, but through his music we experience these ideals for all of humanity on a personal level. We are made to feel as Napoleon did when he conquered the world, as Orpheus did when he conquered the demons of the underworld to rescue his beloved.

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F Minor,
Op. 57 'Appassionata'

I. Allegro assai

II. Andante Con moto - III. Allegro, ma non troppo

Beethoven did not give his 23rd Piano Sonata the nickname 'Appassionata' (Italian for 'passionate,'), this was added after his death by a publisher. Perhaps a better appellation would be 'furious.' It is impossible to say what exactly the emotion is that this piece evokes, but the mood is dark, ironic, even bitter. We are left with the impression of a man who struggles with deep spiritual anguish, one who fights an intense battle with the very angst of being human. The work is violent and prone to sudden outburst, as if an attempt is being made to present to the world a facade of calm in the midst of internal crisis. It is an amazing feat of drama that even when the music seems calm we can sense violence beneath. The whole work is incongruous with itself. It doesn't do the right thing at the right time - it screams when it should talk, it buries its melodies too deep in the piano to sing, it sounds empty when it needs to sound full.

The First Movement

This 'wrongness' is heard from the very first notes; the hands of the pianist are spaced too far apart. The initial idea is played by both hands not one octave apart, but two. The sound is empty. Once the initial idea rises to its top, we hear a little snippet of something completely different, it sounds like the end of a pretty melody. It does not follow a melody, however, but awkwardly finishes a dark brooding foray across the range of the piano. Taken together, the first phrase seems like big foot wearing an elegant, Victorian era hat. Soon after, another disparate element is introduced, four notes, at the bottom of the piano, which are reminiscent of the opening notes from his Fifth Symphony (da-da-da-dum). These notes will come back later, when they serve to usher

the dreadful first idea back into the music. All of this material is presented as quietly as possible, then returns, for no apparent reason, as loudly as possible. After only about thirty seconds, we begin to become aware of the struggle which will pervade this entire work.

In thirty minutes of music, there is really only one melody to speak of; we hear it about one and a half minutes in. This really would be a nice tune, if it weren't accompanied by ominous mashing of the lowest notes of the piano. After all, how can something so pure and innocent as this melody be appreciated in the midst of such torment? At first this melody seems to be ironic, but it's full implications will be realized later in the piece. The melody is not allowed to finish, and is cut off. We then hear the loudest, most violent material so far. By the three-minute mark, all of the material of the first movement is presented, from here on out Beethoven begins to create a narrative with the materials already presented.

Listen closely to how the motives you have already heard are transfigured. Be aware of ideas which were originally dark becoming something very tender. The real magic of this work is that throughout out this storm there are fleeting moments of hope. Just as in our lives, it is for hope that we endure suffering.

The heart of this movement is heard about four and a half minutes in, when the 'pretty tune' comes back the second time. It is played once, but broken off mid sentence, interrupted by the harmony, which shifts higher. The music becomes more agitated; it gets louder. The tune is given another shot, but the same thing happens. The music becomes even more intense. Finally it is played a third time before it is abandoned entirely. The entire fabric of the piece is ripped apart, we are witnessing something like musical thrashing. In the midst of all this, the four note motive is heard again, and the music begins to coalesce around it. The notes are heard again and again, until only one note, very deep in the piano is heard, being sounded repeatedly. This note is like a sort of musical '...'. Nothing is happening, the drama is paused, we wait in uncomfortable silence. Then quietly, the beginning of the movement starts again.

The piece recapitulates its earlier ideas, including a fully realized instance of our 'pretty tune.' Finally the four note motif is heard again, and we are left paused on one unresolved chord, just like an unanswered question. "Is there any hope?" We hear a definitive "No" and the movement ends in absolute dissolution.

Anton Webern

Anton Webern grew up in a cultural and artistic climate which was more volatile than probably any other in history. He was born in Austria six months after Richard Wagner's death; he was a few years younger than Gustav Klimt, a few years older than Egon Schiele. At this point German culture had been captivated by Wagner's work, and the hyper-emotional art of the romantic era was reaching a boiling point. Up to this point, development in art was pointed strictly in one direction: bigger, louder, more intense. The distorted violence of the expressionist movement of Klimt and Schiele bore witness to this. In music however, Richard Wagner's example was hard to top: his operas are hours in length, and the music in them is so arrestingly intense that it seemed to be at the pinnacle of emotional music.

The question "what music can be written after Wagner?" presented quite a problem for musicians at the time. The issue was twofold: on the one hand, following his example seemed an impossibly large task, it is not just a matter of writing a seven-hour opera in response to his six-hour one. The other issue was cultural; Europe was about to witness the most cataclysmic events it had ever seen: the World Wars. Once the wars began, artists became disillusioned with the tenets of romanticism. After all, the romantic era begot sentiments of nationalism, and it was because of these beliefs in cultural supremacy that the wars began. The philosopher Vladimir Jankélévich, writing after the Second World War, considered German romanticism evident of that culture's "hyper-expressionist perversions." Romantic music was considered dangerous. It was so evocative it was believed to have driven people out of their wits.

All around the world there was a call for a more "objective music," which did not rouse our passions, but instead was a kind of "rational art." Webern, along with his teacher Arnold Schoenberg, were at the fore of this new art, inventing a new musical language which was based in mathematics. Webern's mature music, written in Schoenberg's language, proved enormously influential. Within twenty years, practically every composer in the world was writing music of this sort. The question of outdoing Wagner was abandoned, the music world had taken on a new sense of the term "beautiful."

String Quartet (1905)

This work is one of Webern's earliest, written before he decided to abandon the objectives of romanticism. Webern had not met Schoenberg, and was at the time working hard to create an even more expressive idiom than ever heard before. This piece was written before Webern had acquired his real voice - in it we hear Webern searching for a suitable language. The piece stands as a sort of musical collage, we find moments of complete cacophony right next to moments of hyper-emotional music practically lifted straight from Wagner's operas. The overarching sound of the piece drawn from a sonority called the augmented triad, which was never before used as the fundamental sound of a piece of music. The augmented triad is a major chord that has been stretched one tone larger, as a result it feels unstable and desires to move. By making it the fabric of a piece of music, the overall sonority is not unlike the feeling one gets from a painting of Schiele or Klimt, or even Guariglia or Maas; a kind of twisted beauty, of distorted realism, of optimistic darkness. In Webern's hands this sonority became a poignant depiction of angst.

The piece is divided into two large sections. Because Webern was working in a new language, he organizes these sections according to certain small motifs, which are found literally everywhere. By doing this he allows the listener to follow what he is doing by giving us something to grasp onto. The first section is dominated by a motif of just three notes, which he gives us by itself at the very beginning. Webern's indications for performance are "Darkly and Heavily." Soon after a twisted, lurching motif is introduced, and the two motifs are spun together in a strange, skeletal dance. The darkness is interrupted, quite shockingly, by a bright, cheery melody which sounds like a love tune from Wagner's opera. Under the influence of this theme, the piece is pulled into its second section, which is dominated by a calm, lilting, yet still angst-ridden motif.

Webern himself noted on the first page of the score a quotation by German mystic Jacobus Boehme (1575-1624): "The sense of Triumph that prevailed within my Spirit I cannot write nor tell; it can with naught be compared, save only where in the midst of Death, Life is born, like unto the Resurrection of the Dead. In this Light did my Mind forthwith penetrate all Things [...]" It seems that Webern's dramatic idea for this piece was a slow transfiguration of dark to light, of tragedy to optimism. Ultimately, one must admit that his

language is too volatile, too dissonant to portray a feeling of calm at the end. This was a problem that all musicians writing in a new language faced. By making music more dissonant the expressive capabilities of it are limited to darker subject matter. Still, the work as a whole is an achievement. If it is not a poignant depiction of dark to light, it is at least an exploration of feelings of darkness, and instead of turning tragedy into optimism, the listener finds a strange mixture of both at the same time.

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The piano for this evenings performance
was generously provided by:



S T E I N W A Y & S O N S

Thank you to the musicians for their dedication and hard work.
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