

Program Notes

by A. Robert Johnson
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Quartet No. 10 in E-flat, Op.74 “the Harp,” for two violins, viola & ’cello
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

This work was preceded by the three Opus 59 “Razumovsky” Quartets of 1806-1809, commissioned by the count of that name. They were Beethoven’s first since the Opus 18 works of approximately 1798-1800. The Opus 59 pieces were derided by the critics as the work of a madman. Opus 74 of 1809 only added to their contempt. How is it possible for informed people to be so far off the mark in assessing a composer’s lasting worth? I don’t know. It is a question this program tries to address.

The introduction of this work is a lovely evocation of harmonic solitude – *sostenuto*, until he blasts everybody out of their seats with a subito *f*, guaranteed to annoy the unprepared ear. Then he introduces plucking strings – *pizzicatos*. They aren’t isolated effects but a major thematic and sonic feature of the first movement, resulting in the work’s programmatic title. *Our* ears are much more acclimated to such things. Beethoven’s idioms have become welcome after we’ve had a century-and-a-half to adjust. Is this much time necessary to catch on to a creative genius’ flare for originality? Apparently so. The *Adagio* movement is very beautiful. It sings, as *adagios* ought. Let’s skip to the last movement – a theme with variations. More tricks. Who else thought it appropriate to end with variations? No one. He ends the piece with eleven measures of fast scales.

Maybe he was a little chagrined at what he must have put people through with the third movement. It stands tradition on its head. Beethoven’s use of the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter was revolutionary, and this was certainly a revolutionary period in everything. The recent Napoleonic war certainly effected him, as it did everyone. Opus 74 was written at the same time as the *Fifth Symphony* and the *Piano Concerto No. 5* in E-flat. Do you recall the $\frac{3}{4}$ movement of the *Fifth*? He wrote his mind as well as his heart, a rather severe one about then. The quartet’s $\frac{3}{4}$ movement reveals it. In two parts that repeat – the first one fast as hell (*Presto*) and the second faster –

he then repeats them both! He thrusts you into the last movement with no break, having repeated the first part yet again. Now we love him for this quality. We’ll never get enough of it. But back to the “Robert Johnson....”

Pas de deux (2007) by the author (b. 1936) for two pianos and optional percussion, written over the recent holidays by me on commission by Elizabeth Paris, to complement the work of the two winners of the National Federation of Music Clubs 2005 First Prize in the two-piano category, Naomi Sanchez and Stephen Varney. Mrs. Paris is the NFMC current president.

Pas de deux is a tip of the hat to Dmitri Shostakovich, whose 100th birthday was posthumously marked in 2006. New York Philomusica played quite a bit of his music over the years. Certain of his melodic, rhythmic and harmonic devices stick in the post-performance psyche. I’ll not spoil it for you. See how much of this piece brings him to your mind. I don’t quote directly from anything he produced but his idioms stick with one, as you will discover.

The piece is meant to be played by just the two pianos. As we had the percussion on hand for the Bartók I wanted to take advantage of that. If I had an orchestra at my disposal I’d put it to work too!

Magnetic Field (1995) by our Featured Composer, Michael Berkeley, sounds just like you would think a magnetic field would sound if it could be translated into sound. This work is a brilliant exposition of the possibilities in sound that can be brought out in a string quartet in the right hands. The work is in one movement. Several compositional-notational devices of the 20th century make their way into the score, including brief episodes of the use of bending notes up and down, written as “quarter tones,” “aleatoric” (chance) music and proportional notation, in which a player gets faster or slower out of the rhythm of the rest of the music. As I say, these are brief – very brief, but the overall effect is quite mesmerizing. Mr. Berkeley has mastered any number of sonic devices, making them his own property, not for their own sake but to achieve a musical result that would be otherwise unattainable. He is a perfect representative in the 21st century of the qualities

cited in my assessment of Beethoven in his. We are fortunate to find that there are people who seem to have the gift for leading our emotions in ever-new directions, and in keeping with the experience of life in their own time. Meeting them through their art while they are alive is a privilege.

Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (1937) Bela Bartók is a thoroughly analyzed composer. He didn't write prolific amounts of music. The works by which he became known outside of his own locale – piano music, folk music, chamber music, the orchestra and opera – reveal their debt to each other. It is apparent they grew out of others near by in time and character.

He made his living teaching, lecturing and playing the piano. He was married to a pianist. They played the *Sonata for Two Pianos* together on tour, along with solo piano music and for violin and piano. His was not an easy life, but then that is usually the case with people as original as he. His music has elevated him to the rank of one of the greatest in the pantheon of the greats. Koussevitsky commissioned him in 1943 to write the *Concerto for Orchestra* for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It has become standard repertory in major orchestras world-wide. At his death in New York City in 1945 he was destitute.

In the *Sonata for Two Pianos* one recognizes the intuitive gift for theme, rhythm and harmony that distinguish him, and that owe so much to his early work in documenting the folk music of his native Hungary. There are people who will tell you that his oft used strong beat accent followed by a sharp syncopation is drawn from speech patterns of the native language. They could be right. He would not confirm that because he hated having his music analyzed. Even though he has died, I want to stay on his good side.

Artist Biographies

Naoko Tanaka, *violin* is a member of the St. Luke's Ensemble, and is a founding member of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, an ensemble she has led as a concertmaster in performance in Carnegie Hall, throughout North and South America, Europe, and Asia, and on over 30 Deutsche Grammophon recordings. She has also performed in the Sitka, Caramoor, Ravinia, White Mountains,

Saito-kinen (Japan), Aspen, and Marlboro festivals. She has been performing with New York Philomusica for 27 years.

Katharina Grossmann, *violin*, moved to New York in 2001 from her native Germany. She was a member of the European Union Youth Orchestra and has, since arriving in the U.S., been playing with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, Sonyc, N.Y. Collegium, Concert Royal and The Rebel Baroque Orchestra. Sadly for us, she returns to Germany permanently in July 2007.

Junah Chung, *viola*, has held the post of Assistant Principal Viola of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, performed with the Minnesota Orchestra, Nieuw Sinfonietta of Amsterdam and the Jupiter Symphony. He is a regular on many New York stages.

Gerald K. Appleman, *'cello*, was principal in The Cleveland Orchestra before joining the New York Philharmonic as Assistant Principal from which he resigned in 2005 after 32 years. He was a founding member of New York Philomusica and is represented prominently on NY Philomusica Records.

Jared Soldiviero, *percussion*, took part in a rare staging of Harry Partch's opera, *Oedipus* with Newband, and has performed the contemporary micro-tonal music of Dean Drummond. He has also performed with Continuum and the S.E.M. Ensemble, with whom he also recorded. In recital, he has programmed the music of Reynolds, Aperghis, Wuorinen and Rzewski, premiering percussion music by Joseph Pereira. Mr. Soldiviero is a member of the Lucerne Festival Academy, working with Pierre Boulez and the musicians of Ensemble Intercontemporain

Jeffrey Irving, *percussion*, plays in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, New York City Opera, the Springfield and the Westfield Orchestras. He is in *Wicked* now and in past productions of *Caroline, Or Change* and *The Light in the Piazza*. Mr. Irving's interest in contemporary music has resulted in his premiering many new works and recordings, most recently for New York New Music Ensemble on Albany Records. He performs with Speculum Musicae, Flexible Music, Line C3 percussion group, Counter Induction, and is a founding member of the Irving

Lippel Project, a percussion-guitar duo, currently working on two recordings for Focus Recordings.

Pianists **Stephen Varney** and **Naomi Sanchez** have been performing as a piano duo since 2002. Pas de Duo's repertoire spans both classical and popular music. Their recitals are marked by the inclusion of a variety of genres which capture the interest of audience of all ages. In 2005, they were awarded First Prize at the National Federation of Music Club's Biennial Ellis Duo-Piano Competition. In addition, they received the Abild American Music Award for their performance of Frederic Rzewski's Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues. As first place winners at the Bradshaw and Buono International Piano Competition (2005), they performed at Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall. Mr Varney and Ms. Sanchez have been guest artists and clinicians at the San Fransisco Conservatory of Music, Holy Names University (faculty), the Suzuki Teacher Training Institute, and the Bay Area Suzuki Music Association of California, Pas de Duo is based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Mr. Varney is a graduate of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music with a B.M. in Piano Performance. He holds an M.M. from Holy Names University in Piano Pedagogy and Choral and Orchestral Conducting. Currently, he is the conductor of the San Francisco Jewish Folk Chorus and the California Choristers. In addition, Mr. Varney is the director of music activities at the Berkeley United Methodist Church. Together with Ms. Sanchez, he is the director and founder of the Berkeley Academy of Music.

Ms. Sanchez studied at Indiana University, where she received a B.M. and M.M. in Piano Performance. She is on the musical theater faculty at the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT) in San Fransisco. Some of her engagements at ACT include arranging and composing music for several original music theatre pieces featuring the works of pop icons such as Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell. In 2003, she performed in the production *Forever Young: the Music of Bob Dylan* at the Royal National Theatre in London. In addition, Ms. Sanchez directs the children's music program at the Berkeley United Methodist Church.

A. Robert Johnson is the Founder and Artistic Director of New York Philomusica. He played for seven years with the New York Philharmonic and was, for the last two-and-one-half years there, Alernate Solo Horn. Mr. Johnson enjoyed a long association with the legendary jazz pianist, the late Sir Roland Hanna, in the Hanna Trio. He has been composing for a number of years. This will be the first time his music on a subscription concert program.

New York Philomusica was formed in 1971 by its members who were drawn together by appreciation for each other's musicianship and common interest in the *uncommon* repertoire for diverse instrumentations of the early 18th century to the present. Its programs encompass compass combinations varying from sonata, trio or quartet to concerto and classical symphony. They have performed and recorded on three continents in programs formed in the subscription concerts, which are the basis for nearly all their other activities.

Its record label, **New York Philomusica Records**, sells through distribution to retail stores and over the Internet. Currently the catalogue lists 18 titles. It has recorded the October and December concerts in 2006-2007. They will be ready shortly and may be ordered in advance.

Over the years, it has been accorded honors and provided a model for other ensembles in pursuing innovation. In its selection of repertoire, it remains steadfastly loyal to both the traditional and the untried. You will find a wealth of information about the group, its members and history, upcoming events and future plans by visiting the website: www.nyphilomusica.org

On Feb 24 (Pearl River) and March 1 (NYC) Jerome Lowenthal plays an All-Liszt program you will not want to miss. Then on March 24 (Pearl River) and 29 (NYC) Ya-Fei Chuang gives a recital, her second appearance with us this season. She played our first concert of the season.