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Two Concerts: the Ptolemy Players and the Boston Symphony Orchestra

In the past few weeks I attended two performances: the Ptolemy Players "B-Sides" concert, which included an assortment of different chamber and choral compositions, and a performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra of works by Beethoven, Takemitsu, and Dutilleux. The performances were quite different with respect to the types of music they performed as well as the general feeling of the performance. While I enjoyed most the orchestral music performed by the BSO, especially the Beethoven *Eroica* symphony, the Ptolemy Players' concert had a sense of informality that was appealing to me.

On Friday, September 21st, I attended a performance in Killian Hall by the Ptolemy Players, a MIT-associated group made up of students and alumni. This concert, entitled "The B-Sides," was based around a "B" theme: each of the works performed was written by a composer whose name began with a B. Nearly every musical period was represented in the concert. It consisted of works from, as the program referred to them, "the three big Bs" — Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven — and "three small(er) Bs" — Britten, Byrd, and the Beatles. I appreciated the diversity of this range of works, and the relatively informal atmosphere of the concert. However, as I did not have much of a chance to prepare for the concert, I found myself confused by some of the works, and consequently did not enjoy them as much as I would have had I listened to them beforehand.

The first work performed was J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto #2, and it was perhaps the one I was able to comprehend most fully. Though this specific concerto was new to me, I had a fairly clear idea of what to expect, having listened to several of the other Brandenburg Concertos, including studying the fifth one in class. As it came from the Baroque concerto grosso genre, the instrumentation was based on a group of soloists and an orchestra, with continuo. The relatively small orchestra was made up of strings, with continuo played by a bass and harpsichord; the soloists were a piccolo trumpet, violin, flute, and oboe. I had never seen or heard a piccolo trumpet before, so I was a bit surprised by its presence in this piece; I was not aware that it was an

instrument in use during the Baroque era, and I was interested to hear how it would be used. The work followed the conventional Baroque musical forms closely, so I was able to follow it without much trouble. The first movement was a fast movement in ritornello form, with a series of repetitions of a complex theme by the full orchestra interspersed with sections played by the group of solo instruments. The contrast between the solo and ritornello sections was heightened by the different timbres of the instruments; the solo woodwind and brass instruments produced sounds that were quite distinct from the strings. The second movement had an entirely different feel to it, because it not only had a much slower tempo and softer dynamics, but also different instrumentation: the ripieno did not play, only the concertino and continuo. I was not able to recognize the form of this second movement, but it seemed to be in a triple meter, suggesting to me a dance. Finally, the third movement returned to a fast tempo and ritornello form much like the first, providing a sense of symmetry to the concerto as a whole. In this last movement especially, I was struck by the use of the piccolo trumpet, with its uniquely high-pitched and bright sound. The Ptolemy Players' program described this concerto as “the hardest piece in the piccolo trumpet repertoire,” and based on the trumpet’s central role in the last movement, I could understand why. The concerto was characterized by the Baroque tendencies toward complexity, with long, intricate melodic themes rather than simple tunes and a generally polyphonic texture. This gave it more of an intellectual feel than an emotional one, unlike the other works performed in this concert. However, despite this complexity, the concerto’s fairly strict adherence to musical forms I was familiar with made it understandable to me. For that reason, I think it was the work I enjoyed most in this concert.

The other major works presented in the Ptolemy Players’ concert — the other two “Big Bs” — were examples of chamber music from the Romantic era: Brahms’ Sextet no. 1 in B-flat major, op. 18, and Beethoven’s String Quartet no. 5 in B-flat major, op. 130. As I was not familiar with either of these two specific pieces, nor for that matter the genre of Romantic chamber music in general, I did not know what to expect from them. As a result, I found myself trying to determine the most general characteristics of the pieces, such as the overall form and the mood of each movement, and I imagine that a great many of the details and subtleties of the compositions escaped my notice.

The Brahms sextet had four movements and was played by six strings: two violins, two violas, and two cellos. The first movement seemed to be very active and lively; it had a fast, allegro tempo. I recognized a great deal of contrast throughout the movement, as it seemed to be based around two

main themes that contrasted in their melodies, textures, and dynamics. One theme was played primarily by the cellos, while the second theme, which was played by the higher strings, had a rather different feel. Because the movement had two contrasting themes that were developed, I surmised that it was in sonata form. Compared to the Bach concerto played earlier in the concert, one difference was already clear to me: whereas the individual movements of the Bach concerto were fairly consistent with respect to dynamics and tempo, the Brahms sextet showed much more variety within a single movement. The second movement was played at a slower, andante tempo, but even so it still felt lively. It was followed by a short scherzo and trio movement that was played very fast. Though the scherzo had the same triple meter and structure as a minuet movement from the Classical symphonies, the fast tempo gave it a different feel; it did not seem to resemble a dance nearly as much. The final movement, in rondo form, was also relatively fast and seemed to me to have an upbeat, cheerful mood.

The Beethoven string quartet, however, was a bit confusing to me, for several reasons. First, it was rather unlike the other Beethoven compositions I had heard, which were mainly symphonies from his heroic period, such as the Fifth. While I naturally expected the string quartet to sound different from these symphonies simply as a result of the different form and instrumentation, I was not aware until after the concert that this string quartet was written during Beethoven's last years and had a different style. I was also a bit surprised to see that the quartet had an unusual six-movement structure. Beginning with a slow movement, it alternated slow and fast movements thereafter, but in addition to the traditional forms it included movements entitled “Alla Danza Tedesca” and “Cavatina;” the former seemed to be a dance in triple meter, while the latter was slow, somber, and emotional. At a few points during this piece, I found myself feeling lost, unsure of the structures and the meaning of what I was listening to. It would have been very helpful, I think, if I had familiarized myself with the piece before listening to it, or if the sparse program notes had included some information about it. Based on this, I made a point of listening to the works that would be performed before attending my next concert.

Two of the qualities of this concert that I appreciated were its diverse range of music and its informal style. The works performed were of many different types from different eras. In addition to the Baroque and Romantic instrumental works described above, there were also interspersed between them three lighter works. Two were choral works, Britten’s *Flower Songs* and William Byrd’s *Solve Iubente Deo* and *Sing Joyfully*, both sung by a chorus of eight voices. They were

well-performed, but I had the sense that they were not meant to be the focus of the concert but rather mainly intended to provide a bit of contrast between the other pieces. Indeed, I appreciated this variety; I would have found it hard to listen to the string sextet and quartet together without having a different-sounding piece between them. There was also an unusual performance of the Beatles song *For No One*, performed, curiously enough, by a vocalist, harpsichord, horn, electric bass, and drum. While this certainly demonstrated the extreme diversity of the works in the concert, and it was interesting to hear this song with such unique instrumentation, I thought it went a bit too far. The Beatles seemed too different from the other works in the concert to fit in, and some of the instruments, especially the harpsichord, seemed out of place in this song. I also noted that the concert, unlike the BSO concert I went to, had a rather informal style. The humorous introduction given by one of the performers, the reception after the show serving "B" foods, and the entire notion of basing a concert around the letter "B" gave this performance a sense of humor. It felt to me as though the performers took the music seriously, but did not take themselves too seriously.

I also attended a performance of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Seiji Ozawa, in Symphony Hall on October 26th. This concert included Beethoven's famous *Eroica* symphony as well as two twentieth-century works by composers associated with Ozawa and the BSO. The first two works performed were the modern ones. In this case, it was particularly fortunate that I had done a bit of research beforehand and that the program notes were very informative, because neither of the compositions were like any music I had ever heard before. They did not adhere to any traditional structures, and in general their sounds were quite unusual. I suspect the reason they sounded so strange was that the composers did not adhere to the usual rules of tonality, introducing bizarre, dissonant harmonies and non-traditional combinations of instruments. The first work was *Dream/Window*, written in 1985 by Toru Takemitsu, a Japanese composer influenced by the Western style. The program notes explained that it intended to contrast the notions of looking inward in a dream and looking outward through a window. I could see how this dichotomy was being represented in the unusual orchestration. There was a sextet of strings and woodwinds surrounding the conductor, independent from the rest of the orchestra. The sextet had a very clear tone quality, and I thought it might represent the clarity of a window, in contrast to the orchestra's dream-like, mysterious sound. It was not divided into movements, nor were there any clear sections that I could discern; there were a few melodic figures that seemed to be repeated, but no clear themes or development. Combined with the quiet dynamics that faded in at the beginning

and gradually faded out at the end, this gave the music what seemed to me a mysterious, dream-like feel.

The second work, Henri Dutilleux's *The Shadows of Time*, was even more recent, composed in 1995. This work was a bit more complex, being divided into five sections, each with a title. However, unlike the movements of a symphony, they were not clearly delineated; I was sometimes unsure as to when one ended and another began. The first section, entitled “The Hours,” primarily used the brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments. It began with a ticking sound played by the wood block in the background, behind outbursts in the brass and percussion, followed by descending figures in the brass and woodwinds. I learned from the program that the second section, “Malefic Ariel,” represented an evil, sprite-like spirit; I could hear sprite-like fluttering noises in the high strings, combined with ominous, dissonant sounds in the brass and wind instruments. The voices of four children were the focus of the third section, as they sang (in French) “Why us? Why the star?”; the slow orchestral accompaniment contributed to creating a sad mood. The comments in the program explained that the “star” was the Star of David, and that Dutilleux had Anne Frank and the Holocaust in mind. “Blue dominant?”, the title of the final section, ended with a question mark, and the work seemed to me to end with a question as well. Whereas most musical works end by resolving the tension they create, *The Shadows of Time* had an ending filled with tension. The harmonies seemed dissonant and disquieting, and the ticking sound played by the wood block at the beginning of the work returned, but with an irregular rhythm this time. Ultimately, however, I was confused by this work. It seemed certain that the author had intended there to be some kind of story or message in this work, but I simply could not tell what it was. I recognized the themes of time, the evil spirit Ariel, and the Holocaust, among others, but I could not find a coherent meaning in their juxtaposition. Furthermore, I found the dissonant, sometimes even cacophonous, sounds of both of these two modern works to be somewhat difficult to listen to. Based on this confusion and these dissonant sounds, I found the two modern pieces to be interesting to listen to but, overall, not as enjoyable as more traditional compositions.

After an intermission, the performers played Beethoven's third symphony — the *Eroica* symphony, famous for its association with Napoleon. After hearing the two modern works that preceded it, the Beethoven symphony sounded traditional by comparison; it was a welcome change from the atonality and dissonance of the Takemitsu and Dutilleux. At the same time, however, I

could see that this symphony was a radical departure from the Classical symphonies of Mozart and Haydn, and I could recognize a number of similarities to Beethoven's Fifth symphony. The first movement opened with two loud, somewhat dissonant chords; this beginning indicated that the piece had a sense of rhythmic forcefulness unlike a Classical symphony. I recognized a heroic first theme followed by a contrasting slower second theme; the movement was in sonata form, though it had an especially long development section. The second movement was a funeral march that began with a slow, sad theme in duple meter played by the strings, followed by the woodwinds. This struck me as an odd presence in a symphony that was supposed to be heroic, but the sadness soon gave way to loud, forceful crescendos led by the brass and a new, triumphant theme. It conjured in my mind the image of a funeral march at which a great hero was being remembered. It alternated the slow and sad sections with the fast, heroic theme; it the end, the original sad theme returned, as if remembering that this was supposed to be a somber funeral march. The scherzo of the third movement began in a way that reminded me of the scherzo of the Fifth symphony, with short, soft notes being played quickly by the violins and a melody above by the flute. With a great contrast in dynamics, this melody was then played again by the strings, much louder. The trio section made heavy use of the horns, of which Beethoven had added one more than usual to the orchestra. It was based on a new theme, introduced by the horns and answered by the strings. A repeat of the scherzo section followed, ending with strong cadences. Though it essentially shared the same form as the Classical dance movement of a symphony, it seemed much different. The increased tempo gave it an exciting feel for me. In another departure from the traditional form of a symphony, the final movement was in a theme-and-variations form rather than sonata or rondo form. It began by playing a melody in the pizzicato bass strings, then repeated it combined with another melody in the bowed higher strings. This theme was developed and ornamented throughout the movement, until it reached a triumphant final variation in which it was played forcefully by the brass and timpani. I saw this movement as a progression from an initial mysterious bass theme to a heroic conclusion, fitting in with the symphony's central notion of heroism. During this final movement especially, I remember being struck by how energetically Ozawa, the conductor, moved as he led the orchestra through the forceful sections. I enjoyed this symphony greatly, and I think it was my favorite of all the works I heard performed at these two concerts because it combined traditional forms that I could understand with a powerful emotional progression. It reminded me very much of the Fifth symphony that we listened to in class in that it was based on the conventions of the symphonic form, but they were not strictly adhered to; in both symphonies Beethoven disregarded the rules

when it would help express his emotional ideas. I felt like I was able to discern most of the key elements of the symphony, but I was left with the feeling that there was still more to it. Sometime in the future I would like to listen to it again and see if I could recognize more details that would make it even more powerful.

In the two concerts I attended, a great variety of works were performed — from choral to chamber to orchestral music, and from the Baroque to the modern era. The Ptolemy Players concert had a much different scale than the BSO concert: both the number of performers and the size of the audience were much smaller. One result of this was that the music played by the BSO, by virtue of involving so many more musicians and instruments, could achieve greater levels of power and variety of tone. This was one reason why I preferred the music played by the BSO — and, for that matter, why I enjoy orchestral music in general. However, the Ptolemy Players' small concert had an informal style and a sense of humor that I found appealing; it contrasted with the strict formalism of the BSO. The work I enjoyed most was Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony because it expressed a clear emotional sense of heroism through the use of musical structures I was familiar with.