Dan Ports
2001/11/27
21M.011 - Essay 2B

Bach, Berg, Dutilleux, Beethoven and Brahms: A Plethora of Musical Styles

In the past weeks I attended three musical performances. On Friday, September 21st, the Ptolemy Players, a group of MIT students and alumni, performed their "B-Sides" concert in Killian Hall, which was made up of works by Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, and other composers whose names began with the letter B. The Boston Symphony Orchestra's concert on October 26th in Symphony Hall included Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony and two modern works by Takemitsu and Dutilleux. Finally, the Boston Philharmonic performed a Bach cantata, a song cycle by Berg, and a Brahms symphony in Sanders Theater on November 15th. Each concert featured a pleasant variety of musical works that differed greatly in their style: they ranged from Baroque vocal and instrumental music to Romantic orchestral and chamber works to modern compositions from the 20th century. Though many of the pieces were quite dissimilar, I was able to notice similarities between groups of works; I recognized elements in each work that were characteristic of the musical period they represented.

Both the Ptolemy Players and the Boston Philharmonic began their concerts with works by J. S. Bach: his *Brandenburg Concerto #2* and *Cantata #150*, respectively. The most apparent characteristic that these two works shared was the Baroque tendency toward complexity in melodies and polyphonic structures. The Brandenburg Concerto was one of the most easily comprehensible works I listened to because of its use of structures I was familiar with; the cantata was a bit less clear because I was not as familiar with Baroque vocal music.

The Ptolemy Players' performance of the *Brandenburg Concerto #2* was the most understandable for me of all the works performed at their concert. This specific concerto was new to me, but I had a fairly clear idea of what to expect from having listened to several of the other Brandenburg Concertos, including studying the fifth one in class. As expected, the instrumentation was based on a group of soloists and an orchestra, with continuo. The orchestra was larger than a chamber group but relatively small compared to the large ensembles that were common in later eras; it 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, and I

was not aware that it was an instrument in use during the Baroque era, so 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, where the piccolo trumpet had a central role, I was struck by its uniquely high-pitched and bright sound. 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, it was the work I enjoyed most from this concert.

The Bach *Cantata #150*, performed by the Boston Philharmonic, understandably had much in common with the Brandenburg Concerto as they were composed by the same composer. However, they each represented a different axis of Baroque music — a secular concerto versus a sacred cantata — which made for some critical differences. The most immediately apparent difference was, of course, the use of different performing forces. The cantata called for a somewhat larger orchestra, as well as a chorus of about 30 members, and a soprano soloist. By making use of combinations of the diametrically different sounds of the chorus and orchestra, this piece was able to achieve a greater amount of textural contrast. The other defining difference was the subject matter they treated: while the concerto was an abstract work to be performed for the enjoyment of a court, the cantata was a sacred work to be performed for a church service. The use of words, in this case drawn from Biblical passages, provided some structure for the work and made it less abstract. However, I was not able to understand the vocals the way a contemporary audience might have been expected to, as they were in German; with the lights in the theater dimmed, I could not follow the translations in the program while the piece was being performed. Though this certainly did not

help my understanding of the piece, it was not critical as it might seem, since I knew that the general subject matter of the cantata was the uplifting power of faith in times of despair. In this case, I think the musical characteristics of the composition and the general theme were more important than the specific wording. Structurally, the cantata was divided into seven sections, each relatively short. It opened with an sad and solemn introduction, beginning with an instrumental sinfonia section that made use of a descending theme, and a chorus expressing "yearning" for God. The following sections alternated choruses and solo arias, in which the singers expressed their faith. Finally, a passacaglia section was based on repetitions of a bass theme, with variations above. While both the concerto and the cantata had overwhelmingly polyphonic textures, the cantata felt much more emotional rather than intellectual. I imagine that this was the result of the use of vocals; not only were the emotional qualities of the human voice more apparent, but the use of words gave the cantata a concrete meaning rather than a more abstract one.

Several modern works from the 20th century were performed during these concerts. The Boston Philharmonic performed Alban Berg's *Seven Early Songs*, with Margaret O'Keefe as the soprano soloist. The Boston Symphony Orchestra played two works by composers associated with their conductor, Seiji Ozawa: Toro Takemitsu's *Dream/Window*, and Henri Dutilleux's *The Shadows of Time*. In general, I found these modern works somewhat confusing, as they were so much unlike the music I was familiar with; they did not adhere strictly — or, in some cases, at all — to conventional structures or tonalities. While it was interesting to hear such unusual compositions, I did not find them quite as enjoyable as more traditional ones.

Alban Berg's *Seven Early Songs* were performed by the Boston Philharmonic and Margaret O'Keefe, the soloist. The conductor pointed out a few similiarities between this work and the Bach cantata, that both had seven sections, and both composers were 22 years old when they wrote these pieces. However, the two works were otherwise greatly different musically. The Berg composition reminded me of a cycle of lieder, in that it consisted of a series of related songs to be sung by one soloist. However, rather than being accompanied by a piano, Berg called for an entire orchestra, though not all of the orchestra was used in each of the songs. Overall, the cycle had a symmetrical form, with the outer songs using the full orchestra and the inner ones increasingly smaller groups of instruments. As a result, the first and last songs seemed primarily orchestral, while the vocals were much more prominent in the fourth song, *Traumgekrönt*, in which most of the orchestra did not play; this middle song felt most like a lied. As in the Bach cantata, I found myself confused while listening because the words were in German and I was not able to follow the translation.

When I later read the lyrics, I was struck by their elegance, so it was a shame I could not understand them during the performance itself. The words, which expressed the author's love and made heavy use of nature imagery, were also an important component of the songs; without understanding the words, I felt like I missed most of the meaning of the work. I also noted what seems to be a common characteristic in modern music: a deviation from the traditional rules of tonality. The conductor noted that the composition was not entirely atonal but that various songs used unusual scales; for example, the first song used the whole-note scale. I was not able to determine the specific scales being used, but I did notice that the harmonies felt unusual and dissonant. This made the music a bit difficult to listen to for me, though not quite as much as some other modern works.

The BSO performed Henri Dutilleux's *The Shadows of Time*, which was an even more recent work, composed in 1995. It was divided into five sections, each with a title. However, unlike the Berg song cycle or the movements of a symphony, they were not clearly delineated; I was sometimes unsure as to when one ended and another began. This had the potential to be confusing, so it was fortunate that the program notes and pre-concert lecture were informative. The first section, entitled “The Hours,” 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 “Why us? Why the star?” with the slow orchestral accompaniment. 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 each of these two modern works to be somewhat difficult to listen to. Based on my confusion as to their meaning and these dissonant

sounds, I found the modern pieces to be interesting to listen to but, overall, not as enjoyable for me as more traditional compositions.

In both the BSO and Boston Philharmonic concerts, the modern compositions were followed by Romantic symphonies: Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony and Brahms's fourth symphony. In comparison to the modern works that preceded them, these symphonies felt like a return to tradition, a welcome change from the unusual and dissonant sounds. At the same time, however, I could see that they were radical departures from the Classical symphonies of Mozart and Haydn. I recognized a number of similarities between these two symphonies, as well as to Beethoven's fifth. Through their use of variations on conventional musical forms, they reflected the common Romantic practices of modifying the traditional structure of a symphony and expressing emotional ideas.

During the BSO performance of Beethoven’s third symphony, the *Eroica* symphony, I noticed that classical structures were used but not strictly adhered to, and I recognized a sense of heroic emotions. 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. 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 in both symphonies Beethoven disregarded the rules when it would help express his emotional ideas.

The Brahms symphony played by the Boston Philharmonic was similar in that the composer also broke away from the conventional symphonic structure in many respects. However, unlike most Romantic composers, he did so not by using free-form structures but by using traditional elements in places where they are unexpected; while the symphony as a whole does not follow the Classical formula, it makes heavy use of sonata form and even a passacaglia remniscent of the Baroque. The first movement, as expected, was in sonata form, but there were a few unusual alterations. The first theme began with a set of repetitions of a two-note rhythmic motive consisting of a short note followed by a longer one, which seemed to recur in several places throughout the movement; this was followed by a contrasting theme. In the development, the opening segment of the first theme was repeated as though it were a recapitulation, but then unexpectedly led into a variation. The opening of the recapitulation section itself also had an unexpected variation: it began with a slower rhythm, so it was not immediately recognizable as a strict repeat of the exposition. By using the familiar, anticipated sonata form, Brahms is able to more effectively surprise the listener when he deviates from this form. Unusually, the second and third movements were also both in sonata form, though they had different tempos: the second was a slow movement, and the third was very fast and rhythmic, similar to a scherzo. Even though I knew in advance that these two movements would be in sonata form, I was still surprised when I heard the bridge and contrasting second theme that indicated a sonata form; I suppose I have become somewhat accustomed to the typical forms of symphonic movements. The fourth movement had an even more unusual form, a passacaglia that consisted of a series of variations of a repeated ground bass theme. Listening to the variations, I was able to recognize the original theme in many of them, though a few had been developed so much the theme was no longer recognizable. I understood that both this movement and the final movement of the Bach cantata used the passacaglia structure, and their

themes differed only by one note, but even so they were still quite different; if I had not been told that they were related, I doubt I would have noticed. The passacaglia form, like the sonata forms in the second and third movement, was a traditional form from an earlier era used in a non-traditional, Romantic way.

When the conductor, Zander, spoke about this Brahms symphony, his enthusiasm for the piece was clear. As he asked the orchestra to play specific passages, made jokes, and applauded the percussionist as he played a segment on the triangle, the audience could tell that the symphony was, as he described it, one of Zander's favorite musical works. His speech helped me know what to listen for, and above all else it pointed out the depth of musical detail that could be found within the symphony. I was able to recognize some of the details he demonstrated before the performance; however, considering that some of his insights seemed to be new even to the members of the orchestra, I was not surprised when I could not recognize them during the performance. In trying to focus on these musical details, however, I fear that I was not able to get a good sense of the emotional progression of the symphony. I noticed that it began with a contrast between a slow, sad theme and a faster, more heroic one, somewhat like the Beethoven symphony, though it did not have the same sort of triumphant ending. To understand the emotional content of the work beyond that, I will have to listen again to a recording of the symphony.

Each of the three concerts I went to — the Ptolemy Players, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Boston Philharmonic — included works from a diverse range of musical periods. When grouped by the era from which they came, similarities appeared between various works, and I was able to recognize characteristics that reflected their musical period. To simplify greatly, the Baroque compositions by Bach were characterized by polyphony, melodic complexity, and relatively strict adherence to conventional forms. The modern works by Berg, Dutilleux, and Takemitsu were interesting to listen to but somewhat confusing to me because of their departure from the usual structures and tonalities. Finally, the Romantic abstract symphonies by Beethoven and Brahms were based on traditional structures from earlier eras, but they were modified rather than being adhered to strictly; they were the most enjoyable to me because they combined structures I could recognize with expressive emotional content.