

Notes to Martin Bresnick's My Twentieth Century

In the fall of 1994, the Museum of the City of New York devoted one of its rooms to "Radicals in the Bronx" an exhibition commemorating the Bronx workers' housing cooperatives, for many years the residence of the Bresnick family. By moving into the Amalgamated Clothing Workers unit the Bresnicks would join a community which, according to the exhibition catalogue, took for granted

cooperatively owned and operated . . . businesses and educational institutions, from laundries and credit unions to nursery schools that would remain open from 7am to 7pm, providing daycare for working parents. Cooperative living was embraced with a keen eye on a stable future for an autonomous working class. It sought to provide, as one leading advocate put it, "a fortress, now for the working class against its enemies; later--for power."

The memorabilia of Bresnick's childhood-the Peekskill riots, HUAC testimony, sit down strikes, an empowered working class and the cultural front institutions created to sustain it, all this now seems as distant as powdered wigs and blunderbusses in the rooms adjacent to it.

One indication of how distant is Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, where the "detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms" which defined Bresnick's youth are casually dismissed as "mirages." McEwan goes on to express what has become increasingly conventional wisdom-that the imaginary world of artistic creation has supplanted the real world of political and social engagement as an outlet for those invested in "visionary projects." "Only in music," McEwan claims "and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalizingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes."

Were he a character in *Saturday*, Bresnick's taking up orders as a composer would likely be viewed as a renunciation of the political and social engagement which defined his youth. And there are aspects of Bresnick's music which suggest monastic retreat if not Mandarin detachment; it rarely shouts and never harangues. It aims to calmly convince rather than incite. Mostly scored for various sized chamber ensembles, his most public, large scale works are conspicuously unflamboyant. What is striking is not the surface but rather the underlying architecture which supports it- invariably a faultless model of compositional craft, of palindromes and pitch rotations, inversional symmetries-of governing logic recapitulated on all structural levels, of minutely planned proportions unfolding across a rich and varied temporal canvas.

For those who are familiar with it, it hardly needs to be mentioned that Bresnick's quest for structural perfection is worlds away from arts for arts sake self-absorption or academic pedantry. Rather, Bresnick's painstakingly engineered and elegantly constructed works represent a species of homage-the selfless dedication of the master craftsman to his calling and its traditions, a Marxian commitment to value derived from labor over market determined price.

It stands to reason that Bresnick's consummate professionalism was not and could not have been anything but hard won. It resulted from an intimate familiarity and intense study of five centuries of musical literature as well as an apprenticeship with the uncompromising modernist, György Ligeti whose works are similar tours de force of elegance and refinement. It is this legacy which Bresnick's compositional work celebrates and which Bresnick, perhaps the most renowned and effective teacher of his generation, has transmitted to his many students.

As Bresnick's artistic identity has come into sharper focus, his status as a Janus simultaneously looking backwards from modernist rigor to the post-modern eclecticism of which his students (including the Bang on a Can triumvirate Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe and David Lang) are among the best known exponents has become increasingly evident. A qualification is necessary, however. Bresnick's relationship to the "visionary project" of high modernism is in an important respect revisionist: as Richard Taruskin has observed, the high modernist utopia has its roots in despair-in the charred embers of post-war Europe. This reality required the creation of a musical culture ex nihilo, openly rejecting references to the traditions implicated in the catastrophe. Bresnick's cultural roots and life experience did not require "the air of other planets" taken as the prevailing atmosphere of contemporary music since Schoenberg. No matter how formally hermetic, elaborate and elegant, Bresnick's work draws its ultimate inspiration from social reality, specifically, from a Bronx worker's community defined by a faith in human possibility, human nature and human institutions.

All of the works on this recording find Bresnick with feet planted in both worlds: in a utopian world of pure invention on the one side and, on the other, in the real world - of virtuoso performers with whom Bresnick has had a long and fruitful relationship, of the partly shared and partly idiosyncratic psychology of listeners who engage his work, and, perhaps most crucially, in the real world of people, things and ideas which are the subjects of the discourse of the works-the communicative ends served by the music's syntactic means.

Of the five works in this collection, the title work, "My Twentieth Century" is perhaps the most unproblematically referential. Having at its core a valedictory

poem by the late Tom Andrews, with whom Bresnick became acquainted at the American Academy in Rome in 1999, the work projects Andrews's "Twentieth Century" and in the process magnifies it into a kind of anthem for the sixties diaspora, an ode for the ambivalent remnants of the counter-culture, and its legacy of dissent and liberation which remains ineradicably lodged within the collective unconscious.

Among Bresnick's most public works, "My Twentieth Century" bears comparison with historical pageants such as Copland's Lincoln Portrait, Schoenberg's Ode to Napoleon, Beethoven's Egmont and Honneger's Jean d'Arc among others. But whereas these works present history in the third person singular, centered around iconic figures appearing as narrators, "My Twentieth Century" is concerned with history from the bottom up, as lived experience: how we reveled in it by "dancing like a sumac tree," accommodated ourselves to it "by wearing ridiculous clothes," were victimized by it having to "eat peck of dirt," or were "anesthetized" through it all.

This first person plural voice is embodied in Bresnick's enlisting the performers in their civilian capacities, as it were, not as rarefied virtuosi but as fluent English speakers, regional dialects intact, representing, in this performance, all corners of the globe. The effect is of a ritualistic procession conferring an everyman universality and almost painful authenticity to Andrews's fragmentary reminiscences.

These are underscored by music which initially seems to function as a tabula rasa, recalling Orwell's famous prescription that the best prose is a windowpane, drawing the least attention to the medium through which its content is conveyed. Of course, Bresnick's success in making the musical structure vanish is an illusion. No less than in any other Bresnick composition, it is an intricate lattice work articulated by a underlying harmonic progression which unobtrusively highlights the procession as it unfolds. The harmony provides a foundation on which independent lines derived from simple diatonic hexachords are superimposed. The resulting chromatic dissonances and occasional tonal disturbances propel the narrative forward towards resolution.

The surface calm created by the relative consonance of the texture is deceptive. A second hearing reveals a gamut of emotions ranging from the vehement, to the plaintive to the blissfully naïve. The exchange of "passionate letters" is accompanied by an thrashing exchange of double stops in the upper strings. "Sweet apples" are evoked by delicate lyricism in the winds. Conversely, death does indeed knock on the door, as indeed it did too many times in all of our twentieth centuries, taking the form of martellato piano chords which open the piece and bring it to a darkly ambiguous close.

From a commentary on the historical trajectory of a generation, “Songs of the Mouse People” narrows the focus to the smallest subject, Kafka’s Josephine, the mouse diva. This is Bresnick’s fourth reflection on Kafka, joining “Be Just,” “The Bucket Rider” and the string quartet “Bucephalus,” works which are stamped by a typically Kafkaesque sense of foreboding. The mouse songs capture another side of Kafka, the tragic-comic tenderness of what is nearly a children’s tale, albeit one continually disrupted, and finally obliterated by inquistorial asides and troubling digressions.

Bresnick selects sentences from Kafka’s story as titles for the first book of arias (of a prospective three) for the beloved Josephine. These short, wordless tunes are what one might expect from a tiny rodent, although they break into some of Bresnick’s most virtuoso instrumental writing. Sometimes, it is virtuosity traditionally defined- the sixty-fourth note scurrings set into motion by foot stamps and knee slaps in “Every Disturbance is an Opportunity”, the barriolage arpeggios of “A Thousand Shoulder Tremble,” the intense cantabile of “That Peace We Yearn For” requiring formidable control of bow speed and faultless altissimo intonation.

At other times, the virtuosity required is better described as anti-virtuosity, a confrontation with the physiological capabilities of the instrumentalist and the physical limitations of the instrument. These result in an exploration of the Ivesian interstices between notes and sounds mirroring that of Josephine herself, who “has to put such a terrible strain on herself to force out not a song—we can’t call it song—but some approximation.” Still she “gets effects which a trained singer would try in vain to achieve and which are produced precisely because her means are so inadequate.”

The protracted silences, strainings, and scrapings, occasionally interrupted by wordless coloratura effusions evoke the pre-linguistic state of earliest childhood, a comparison which Kafka’s narrator makes of Josephine’s singing.

Something of our poor brief childhood is in it, something of lost happiness that can never be found again, but also something of active daily life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet springing up and not to be obliterated. And indeed this is all expressed not in full round tones but softly, in whispers, confidentially, sometimes a little hoarsely. . . Here (sounds) are set free from the fetters of daily life and it sets us free too for a little while.

Whether Bresnick's songs are heard a reflection on Kafka's story, a portrait of the Josephine, or are, in fact, Josephine's songs themselves depends on one's perspective; that we ask these questions is indicative of the degree to which Bresnick requires us to live in Kafka's (and Josephine's) world.

"Grace" returns to what, in a considerable understatement, can only be called a broad subject, that of consciousness and its relation to mind and body. It does so by way of a remarkable essay "The Puppet Theatre" by Wilhelm von Kleist which addresses these and related matters in the form of a dialogue between two old friends in a public park. The one, recently appointed principle dancer at a local theatre, is found to be a regular at performances by a marionette troop. Why, the other wonders, does he so often avail himself of this "vulgar species of an art form?"

The answer has to do with what both agree is the distinctive gracefulness of the marionettes. The dancer proposes to his initially skeptical acquaintance that grace inheres in "the traces of human volition" having been removed from the wooden bodies, such that they are subject purely to natural forces and the will of the operator. Although it will be in vain, human dancers can and should aspire to such grace.

Bresnick's meditation on von Kleist takes the form of a concerto for two marimbas whose primary and secondary roles personify the dancer and his rather more pedestrian interlocutor. The choice of the marimba might seem initially somewhat odd-- more easily associated with Tequila lubricated south-of-the-border junkets than Socratic discourses. It is, in fact, an inspired choice, one naturally following from von Kleist's observation with respect to the marionette theatre that "the operator controls with his wire or thread only this centre, the attached limbs are just what they should be: lifeless, pure pendulums, governed only by the law of gravity." Von Kleist's description applies equally to the mallet virtuoso for whom the weight of the appendages and the mallets are indeed experienced both from within and without as "removed from human volition," in a word "effortless."

The first movement "Pendula and the Center of Gravity" states this essential premise, doing so in the melodic form of two minor third leaps. Initially these are heard less as motives than as gestures suggesting mallets not having been directed at, but rather allowed to fall on, the wooden bars of the marimba. The premise is gradually developed while, as is rhetorically necessary, being continually, almost obsessively, restated in its original, literal form, throughout the course of the piece.

The second marimba's role is immediately identifiable. He restates the dancers words verbatim, the mechanical repetition suggesting a less than complete comprehension. As the movement progresses, the dancer further elaborates his thesis, while his counterpart tries to grasp it, chiming in by picking up a few words or a short phrase and sometimes advancing a tentative continuation of the dancer's line of thought.

The second movement, "On the Heaviness of Matter" states the premise in an altered form: inverting its pitch relationships by exchanging the horizontal/melodic and vertical/harmonic axes. The minor thirds now become the basis for a lushly orchestrated and evocative string of harmonies which support some of Bresnick's most stately and affecting melodies, simple but powerful statements which seem to be brought in by the breeze, and disappear.

In the third movement "Grace Will Return," the music takes flight through arpeggiated statements of the initial premise. While subjected to metrical displacements, these tend remain grounded in static pitch configurations. The tonal stasis embodies the final passage of von Kleist's imagined encounter: the two friends have reached a shared conclusion with respect to the "the damage done by consciousness to the natural grace of a human being. . . Only when consciousness has passed through an infinity will grace return. Grace will be most purely present in the human frame that has either no consciousness at all or an infinite amount of it, which is to say either in a puppet or in a god."

"Tent of Miracles" extends Bresnick's embrace outward to encompass global villages of two hemispheres: the magic realism of Brazilian author Jorge Amado channeled through the interlocking textures and pentatonicisms of gamelan, the latter an idiom in which Bresnick has had an abiding interest, in part through his students the composers Michael Tenzer and Evan Ziporyn.

The multitracked parts were originally conceived to be routed to four audio outputs, spatially arranged in a pyramid configuration enveloping the audience in a sonic realization of Amado's tent. Within the tent, a master artist commits to canvas a miracle in which a jaguar, which had attacked a family, is tamed by a local saint. While attempting to portray the animal having been made docile by divine intervention, the jaguar insists, in the imagination of the painter, on reasserting its true nature:

Lídio Corró turned again to his favorite figure, the formidable striped cat, gigantic and pitiless, with its flaming eyes and its mouth, oh, that fearful mouth, smiling at the baby! The artist tried his best to erase the smile and the look of affection; he

gave the backlands jaguar the bearing of a tiger and the ferocity of a dragon. But he couldn't help it: the fiercer he made the jaguar, the broader the animal's smile; between the wild beast and the child there was a secret pact, an old familiarity, an immemorial friendship.

Lídio gave up and signed the painting

The experience of characters taking on a life of their own is a familiar one to composers as much as it is to novelists or painters, though in musical context, this plays out in a somewhat abstract matter. A motive, harmony, or texture seems to demand a particular treatment which wreaks havoc with the best laid plans, sometimes demanding that the frame and other material which initially seemed appropriate be jettisoned altogether.

One imagines that within Bresnick's tent, what has taken on a life of its own is the baritone sax-itself a wild animal of the wind family. It's true nature, defined by harmonic shrieks, multiphonics, fog horn blasts, enters the tent and is brought under control by the composer. But as in Lídio Corró's painting while the wild animal is tamed, it's smile remains.

The same might be said of "Fantasia on a Theme by Willie Dixon" which has more than a few beasts lurking in its shadows ready to pounce. Among these are the electric organ, the overdriven guitar and trap-drums, these the legacy of the plugged-in sixties, in which Bresnick as lead singer and rhythm guitarist of the rock band "Salt," played a minor role.

There is, as always, much to say on the structural characteristics and compositional strategies which make the Fantasia cohere: one might focus on the inherent duality of the minor third, its extensional character as three semi-tones, its intentional character as the first two notes of Willie Dixon's classic tune. Or one might focus on the inherent ambiguity of the minor third, consistently exploited here, in defining two triads and tonal centers, with additional layers of meaning accruing to it as the "blue note" or the "sharp 9th". Such an analysis would give some insight into the piece's form but not its meaning within Bresnick's westward migration to the San Francisco Bay Area to attend Stanford, catching the last wave of the Summer of Love. For this story we need to cede the floor to Bresnick himself.

In the spring of 1968 I was sitting, not completely in my right mind, at a table in a very large house in Palo Alto rented by a group of Stanford medical students. These future doctors were then my very

own merry pranksters and I had often tagged along while they tried radical politics, communal living, vegetarian foods, medical school laboratory pharmaceuticals, even raising a lion cub, whose nightly roaring eventually alerted the neighbors and gave one of the students a rare African lion's disease.

But on this night, after a meal of randomly exotic foods and sundry medications, they retired with their lovers to the (not quite adequate) privacy of their rooms, leaving me alone in the immense dining room, while a recording I had never heard before (oh Ginger, Jack and Eric!) gradually invaded every neuron of my not so slowly blowing mind.

As I stared intently at the remains of a dinner that in my peculiar state resembled a disorderly old Dutch Master's still-life, a basic blues grew relentlessly from elemental simplicity into melodic improvisations worthy of a south Indian master, and the blues pulse multiplied into an infinity of polyrhythmic patterns, and the individual lines became a counterpoint that extended above and beyond the fifth species, and then, finally, when after a shattering climax of impassioned instrumental virtuosity Willie Dixon's great tune returned, I knew I had heard something I would never forget -

that spoon,
that spoon,
that - spoonful.

From the cultural front Bronx, to flower power Haight-Ashberry, to extended residencies at the Rome Academy, as an Ivy League mentor to much of what is best in the next generation, Bresnick's Twentieth century, as it is evoked in these pieces, was clearly lived better than most.—John Halle