Tobias Picker

Notes

Like so many others of his generation, **Tobias Picker** (*b* 1954) found his compositional persona within an academic environment that preached the virtues of twelve-tone technique. But although Picker embraced the method, he never allowed himself to be confined by it. In his music, he gives voice to an uninhibited Romantic streak, one that is eager to subvert any tendency toward systematization. That tension between rigorous, disciplined structure and an impassioned, seemingly intuitive surface lends Picker's music its distinctive character.

While still a teenager, Picker realized that what he most needed was the means to channel his strong emotions into a coherent discourse. "I recognized very early one of my leading personality traits, total irrationality, and I recognized that I needed as much discipline as I could possibly get. So I didn't need a teacher who encouraged self-expression; if anything, I needed someone to discourage it." Picker, therefore, sought out teachers who would emphasize strict pre-compositional planning. Ultimately, he ended up studying with all three pillars of the American rationalist triumvirate Charles Wuorinen (at the Manhattan school), Elliott Carter (at Juilliard), and Milton Babbitt (at Princeton).

It was Wuorinen who was most influential, for he taught Picker a formal, schematic approach to twelve-tone composition that offered the young man the discipline he sought. Yet Picker, although delighting in his new found compositional control, never became a slave of the system. Instead he crafted scores as notable for their innate emotionality as for their impeccable structure.

An early chamber work like Sextet No. 3 (1976), written at the end of his study with Wuorinen, reveals both his debt to his teacher and his own restless temperament. The fragmented, disjunct melodic lines, the widely-spaced, pointillistic textures are bold, explosive, and given their austere, modernist context, surprisingly traditional. The slow, chorale-like chords of the second movement are repeatedly interrupted by scurrying sixteenth-notes, whose propulsive force seems closer to modern jazz (or Stravinsky) than to the legacy of the Second Viennese School. And the Sextet closes on a luminous D-flat major triad a radiant summation (and maybe even negation) of the complexities that precede it.

When Soft Voices Die (1977), written for the pianist Ursula Oppens, shares the stylistic profile of the Sextet No. 3. But its expressive force is very different. Where the Sextet No. 3 keeps its emotions in check, *When Soft Voices Die* gives them full rein. Although *When Soft Voices Die* was inspired by a poem of Shelley's ("Music, when soft voices die", vibrates in the memory), it is far removed from the gentle, perfumed sentiments of the texts. Loud rather than soft, its densely-textured virtuosity explores every aspect of piano technique. Bold Lisztian arpeggios sweep up and down the keyboard, although they are placed in a context closer to Bergian Expressionism than to the nineteenth-century salon. A rare moment of repose occurs at the very end, when an E-minor ninth chord rises across the surface of the keyboard. That, says Picker, is a reference to an early mentor, who died while the piece was being composed, and whose spirit ascends to heaven at its close.

By now, Picker was studying with Elliott Carter, and he found himself occupied with new compositional concerns. "One thing Carter pointed out to me about the music I had written up to the time I came to study with him was that there were lots of very short phrases one after another. So I began to think about longer phrases and overlapping lines." Both the *Rhapsody* (1978) and the *Romance* (1979) exhibit that newly long breathed melodic contour. Since both are scored for violin and piano, it is hard to say whether Carter's influence, or the nature of the string instrument, is the source of Picker's shift in style. But the shift itself is readily apparent. The *Rhapsody* is still filled with mercurial gestures, with sudden juxtapositions of mood and material. The *Romance* has a more sustained melodic profile, and a far more regularized, metrical rhythmic sense. Both, however, show that new sense of line, beautifully shaped and clearly directionalized. And both give increasing prominence to tonal implications whether in triadic references, pedal points, or bold octaves and unisons at places of arrival.

Still, none of these elements prepare one for the dramatic change in style that occurs in Picker's Violin Concerto (1981). Again it is hard to pin down the origin of that change. Partly it is due to the nature of the medium, to the very different demands of orchestral writing. "The chamber pieces are all very compressed," says Picker. "Everything is made as succinct as possible, and every beat is crammed with information. But that sort of textural complexity simply does not work in orchestral music. The orchestral medium requires painting with a broad palette. There's a tendency to want to make a bigger kind of statement using larger-then-life, full-sized gestures when you have the whole orchestra. And the concerto tradition itself, favoring grand, showy rhetoric, demands a simpler, more expansive approach."

Picker refuses to acknowledge any stylistic transformation in the Violin Concerto, pointing out that all its traits may be found in his previous works. In one sense, he is correct. The lyrical lines, the steady rhythms, and the tonal references have all appeared in the past. But now, instead of being incidental elements, they are dominant. Long pedal points and motoric ostinato figures underpin this Concerto, providing both tonal basis and a toe-tapping pulse. The violin line soars in long, unbroken arcs, a far cry from the fitful gestures of the Sextet. Now, modernist angularity is relegated to the virtuoso passagework, where leaping, disjunct writing would normally be found. Elsewhere, the soloist's material—the sweeping arpeggios and scales, the bold double-stops, the enraptured lyricism—is reassuringly familiar, fully part of the Romantic concerto tradition.

Even more apparent, however, are the ways in which the Violin Concerto reinterprets concerto traditions. The first movement, like *When Soft Voices Die*, recalls the anguish of Bergian Expressionism, but the formerly episodic construction has given way to a sustained sense of large-scale structure. Picker's frequent tonal references stem not only from his persistent ostinatos and pedal points, but from the fact that his row is constructed from interlocking diminished sevenths, a row rife with triadic implications.

That row is made explicit in the Interlude, which links the slow, sensuous second movement and the propulsive third. The Interlude, replacing a traditional cadenza, consists entirely of a repeated double-stop sixteenth-note pattern; its unrelenting *moto perpetuo* thrust is far removed from the quasi-improvisatory character of most cadenzas. Gradually, the orchestra joins in, adding flecks of color, helping the soloist with the rapid-fire barrage. The essential intervallic materials, pure diminished seventh chords, are expressed by the violin in the Interlude. The Interlude is a structural focal point, a kind of revelation. It's as if you were looking at a building and suddenly everything became transparent, so you could see the girders holding it up.

Eventually, the Interlude leads into the finale, whose snarling, percussive force and motoric rhythms seem closer to Stravinsky than Berg. And, for a fleeting moment, the soloist plays triadic arpeggios that pay homage to the violin concertos of Brahms and Tchaikovsky. "I was very worried about those arpeggios," laughs Picker. "But Milton Babbitt told me they'd sound like a million bucks so I kept them."

Of course the story of Tobias Picker's music does not end in 1981. The opening-up of his musical language, so apparent in the Violin Concerto, continues in the vividly pictorial *Encantadas* (1983), the exuberantly populist Piano Concerto, *Keys to the City* (1983, available on CRI CD 554), and the unabashedly tonal *Old and Lost Rivers* (1986). To some, the new accessibility of Picker's music places him within the orbit of neo-Romanticism. But that would be too facile a label. For in Picker's music there is no easy return to the past; all is informed by the structural and expressive concerns of the late twentieth century. What Picker has done is to find that elusive balance between systematization and intuition, between Apollonian rationalism and Dionysian sensuality. Now he can write music that flows directly from the heart, confident that the mind will follow.

—*K. Robert Schwarz*

Production Notes