

Music for the Viola

A Twentieth Century Anthology, Vol. 2

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John Graham, violist

Piece for Viola Alone, (1970) by **Stefan Wolpe** (b. 1902 Berlin; d. 1972 New York City) is a transcription by Peter Perrin for John Graham of a violin work composed in 1966. It is through-composed, and there is very little literal repetition. Instead, Wolpe relies upon the art of continuous variation, presenting musical material and constantly altering it in imaginative and clever ways. Theodor Adorno's comment, "for Schoenberg, enough is not enough," could just as truthfully be applied to Wolpe, who is not content to use melody and rhythm as the only means through which to create unity and coherence. Wolpe, in whose music a sense of playfulness is never far from the surface, goes so far as to let the idea of repetition become itself a subject, and to make use of dynamics as an aid to recognition and identification. Thus, although we have never heard the lovely lilting melody that concludes the piece, the repetition of this single phrase gradually diminishing in volume brings us gratifyingly back to the very opening measure of this expert composition.

Elegy by **Igor Stravinsky** (b. 1881 Oranienbaum, Russia; d. 1971 New York City) is a deeply-felt lament at the loss of a loved one. The art of *Elegy* consists in, to borrow Thomas Mann's phrase, "art's throwing off the appearance of art." Stravinsky eschews the flashy pyrotechnics of so many twentieth-century solo pieces: ornamental turns in the viola emulate the quavering of the human voice, while the slow and steady eighth-note pulse suggests the dignified step of the funeral march. Certainly in the war-torn year of 1944 in which it was composed, there were many victims worthy of this somber token of remembrance.

Elegy, which lasts barely five minutes, is divided into two movements, but the almost verbatim repeat of the first movement at the end of the second, and the voice-like writing of the viola, suggests the ABA form of the da capo aria. The simplicity of the musical style is mirrored in the simplicity of the form.

The two A sections contain a lament with accompaniment, in a clearly-defined c-minor key, with phrygian-mode inflections that suggest folk and ritualistic music, music that is elemental to natural human expression. Section B, technically speaking, is organized as a two-voiced fugue, but the artfulness of this learned construction is obscured by the distance between the two voices, which renders them difficult to connect. As one listens to the wandering of the two independent voices, and to the pungent dissonances created by them, one quickly perceives that Stravinsky's intention is to convey the intense and natural expression of sorrow rather than the articulate artifices of musical craft.

Joycesketch II (1981) by **David Schiff** (b. 1945 New York City) is refreshingly idiomatic for the

viola. Although the work requires a virtuoso performer, player and instrument are not locked in mortal combat; rather Schiff reinforces the viola's natural tendencies. Scalar passages, arpeggiated material and harmonics are chosen with a keen ear and intelligence for what is "violistically" idiomatic.

Joycesketch II is one of four pieces by Schiff conceived as an exploratory sketch for his opera, *Dubliners*. Irish music serves as its inspiration. Although all of the tunes are original, they are modelled on four kinds of Irish music—the slow ballad, a jig, a reel and bagpipe-inspired music.

Three Diversion for Solo Viola, Op. 41 was composed for John Graham in 1982 by **David Wooldridge** (b. 1931, Seal, England) It is a short work which, however, makes great demand on the virtuosity of the player.

The brief first movement is based entirely on the opening phrase, the most characteristic feature of which is its exotic, phrygian-mode construction. The second movement dispenses with the folk flavor, and is altogether less associational and more abstract than the first. Also, whereas the first movement consists of solid, two-part counterpoint, the second is made of gossamer arpeggios, with brief moments of contrasting material vaguely reminiscent of the opening. It is for the third movement to combine elements of the first two into a well-integrated and dramatic whole, culminating in a *presto* section of repeated notes and double-stops, which brings this brief virtuosic work to a close, and ties whatever loose ends were intentionally created in the open-ended dramatic shape of the previous two movements.

An Arsenal of Defense (1982) by **Morton Subotnick** (b. 1933 Los Angeles) is one of a series of pieces that makes use of a "ghost box" a computerized sound processing system that alters the sound of an instrument without itself having any sonic capabilities.

In ***An Arsenal of Defense***, the ghost box manipulates the sound of the viola in four different ways, timed and controlled by a fixed computer program. The different sounds generated by each of the four treatments produce four sonically different sections, which are presented without pause. In places, the ghost box radically alters the sound of the viola, making it resemble a harsh discordant machine. These sounds are in keeping with the work's intention, which is to depict, in the composer's words, "...a fearful, almost paranoid state of mind—seen in many of the leaders of today's nations (and, alas, many of the people in those nations)."

An Arsenal of Defense was commissioned by John Graham and written for him with a grant from the American Music Center.

The Door of the Sun (1975) by **Peter Maxwell Davies** (b. 1934 Manchester, England) is a five-movement work played without pause. Although there is an interpenetration of musical ideas among all of the movements, each movement maintains its own distinct identity.

The first movement marked *Allegro*, manages in a short length of time to touch on music of very different characters and to work itself up to a tempestuous climax, all the more powerful for its brevity. The second movement, a *Lento* that does not in the least give the impression of slowness, abandons the bow in order to pluck and strum mostly repeated-note figures. Movement Three, *Presto*, with mute, is a ghostly, scherzo-like movement which lasts only an instant.

Whereas the first three movements present ideas in an impetuous and somewhat flighty way, Movement Four, *Lento*, appropriates a line embedded in Movement One and develops it in two-part counterpoint. It is the centerpiece of the work, and is its most sustained statement. Movement Five picks up where Movement Four left off, with two-part counterpoint, but quickly departs to incorporate strikingly opposed registral extremes, varied gestures and the effects of *pizzicato* and *glissando* (all traceable to other movements), concluding the work with a " summing up" that is agitated, rather than conciliatory and well-integrated.

Terre-Feu (Earth-Fire) (1981) for Solo Viola unfolds with a pace and with an attention to sonic detail that suggests that its composer, **Ton-That Tiet** (b. 1933, Hue, Vietnam) is as concerned with sound itself, and with the present moment, as he is with describing a musical process. The work is one of a series for stringed instruments based on the five elements—Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth—that are fundamental to the Chinese philosophical conception of the evolution of the universe. Each of the five elements is assigned a pitch (F-Earth, C-Fire, G-Metal, D-Water, A-Wood), and these various elements engage each other in conflict or in unity. In this work the predominating pitch is the earth tone, F, which serves as the point of departure and arrival; it is sometimes, as in the opening, the focal point of a section, around which everything is related as filigree; and at other times, it is the one stable element in the storm center of musical events.

Tiet's attention to sonic detail is evident from the very outset. We hear the F played in various rhythms and timbres. Throughout this work the sound production (harmonics, *sul ponticello* and other effects) creates an aura of mystery, a kind of sonic atmosphere entirely conducive to the non-rational, mythological character that the composer is trying to evoke.

Bernd Alois Zimmerman (b. 1918 Bliesheim, Germany; d. 1970 Konigsdorf, Germany) created a body of solo works embracing, in the composer's words, "solitude, stillness and pure musical thought stripped of superficiality."

One such work is **Sonate** (1955), which may be heard in two parts, each creating a distinctly different musical scenario. The first consists of successions of unrelated musical ideas juxtaposed to form larger phrases. These ideas are radically different, both gesturally and sonically. Proximity, rather than motivic or timbral relationships, links these diverse and refractory musical materials together, although frequent returns to the sound of double-stops, especially of two close pitches, helps to unify the entire section.

The second part of the piece begins with the emergence of hymn-like melodies (the first such sustained music in the piece) played in two-part counterpoint. Into these simple melodies are interpolated the unrelated ideas of the first section, which now serve a colorful, accompanimental function. These diverse fragments, now heard in a context of subordinate figurations, perhaps appear, retrospectively, to have been all along sparkling, eccentric accompaniments in search of a theme.

—Perry Goldstein

John Graham has performed throughout the United States, Europe and China in recital, orchestra and chamber music engagements, and has been active in expanding the literature for the viola through his premiere performances of new works for the instrument.

He has been guest artist with several major American string quartets, and appears frequently at the Marlboro Music Festival and the Aspen Music Festival. He has recorded the complete quintets of Mozart with the Juilliard String Quartet, quartets of Berg, Debussy and Ravel with the Galimir String Quartet and numerous American works by composers with the new music ensemble Speculum Musicae,

Graham has taught at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China. He is currently Artist-in-Residence at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and is on the faculty of the Mannes College of Music in New York City.

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