PULITZER WINNERS

AN NSU FACULTY RECITAL BY PAUL CHRISTOPHER, CELLO

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

The Pulitzer Prize for Music is awarded annually "for distinguished musical composition by an American that has had its first performance or recording in the United States during the year." Administered by Columbia University, this prize is one of the most prestigious awards available in American art music. Past winners have included William Schuman, the first recipient in 1943, Aaron Copland, Charles Ives, Samuel Barber, Elliott Carter, George Crumb, John Adams, and Steve Reich. Although the prize has rightly acknowledged these and other distinguished composers of American classical music, the Pulitzer has often received criticism for being too restrictive in its selections and, more recently, too indiscriminating. Writing in 1998, composer and music critic Kyle Gann lamented, "The Pulitzer Prize is given only to Eurocentric composers… an extremely narrow slice of the current new-music spectrum." Indeed, though the prize recognized its first jazz musicians in the 1990s, these winning works had clearly applied classical models to a jazz idiom, for example, Mel Powell's concerto, *Duplicates*, and Wynton Marsalis's oratorio, *Blood on the Fields*. The current prize description, quoted above, was adopted in 2004; while one past winner Gunther Schuller called the decision, "a long overdue sea change," another John Harbison derided it as "a horrible development." What is certain, however, is that aesthetic diversity has greatly expanded over the past sixteen years, so that recent winners include works in free jazz and even hip hop as well as more classical compositions; many also reflect on social, racial, and ecological concerns.

The composers represented on tonight's program are from the "old days" of the Pulitzer when it was very much the property of academia and the serialist idiom which was then orthodox. **Donald Martino (1931-2005)**, our first composer, reacted to the 2004 criteria change, "The prize has already begun to go in the direction of permitting less serious stuff, wording or not. If you write music long enough, sooner or later, someone is going to take pity on you and give you the damn thing." Martino had won the Pulitzer in 1974 for his chamber sextet, *Notturno*. Nevertheless, we must not be too quick to dismiss someone like Martino: while our era celebrates immediate appeal and a multiplicity of perspectives, in the third quarter of the twentieth century, intellectual rigor was the highest good. The more complicated a piece of music, the more challenges it offered patient listeners. Awards like the Pulitzer signaled that a composer had reached the top of his field, that his vantage point had triumphed over the musical discourse. Moreover, the three Pulitzer-winning composers whose music we hear tonight were among the most accomplished of American academic composers, rivalled only by their esteemed colleague Milton Babbitt. Martino was, from 1969 to 1981, chairman of the composition department at the New England Conservatory; afterwards he taught at Harvard, retiring as Professor Emeritus in 1992. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; a recipient of three Guggenheim Fellowships, another three awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Fulbright Scholarship, and a Kennedy Center Friedham Award; and was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Koussevitzky Foundation, and Coolidge Foundation.

Just as accomplished but somewhat older, **Roger Sessions (1896-1985)** had been a teacher to both Martino and Babbitt as well as numerous others, including Harbison, Robert Cogan, Edward T. Cone, David Diamond, Tod Machover, Ursula Mamlok, Conlon Nancarrow, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, and the British composer, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. His profound influence as a teacher places him in good company with Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg. His teaching career is commonly associated with Princeton, but he also did a stint at University of California, Berkeley following World War II and finally held a post at Juilliard from 1966 to 1983. Sessions was actually the recipient of two Pulitzers—a Special Citation "for his life's work as a distinguished American composer" in 1974 and then the 1982 Prize for his Concerto for Orchestra. Otherwise, his honors include election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a MacDowell Medal, and the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard where he presented a lecture series titled, "Questions about Music." Finally, **Charles Wuorinen (1938-2020)** taught at Columbia, seat of the Pulitzer, from 1964 to 1971 where he had previously been a student and had co-founded the Group for Contemporary Music with fellow classmates, flutist Harvey Sollberger and cellist Joel Krosnick. His Pulitzer-winning work, *Time's Encomium*, an electronic composition, was developed at the pioneering Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. An outspoken and often controversial figure, Wuorinen won the Pulitzer in 1970 but was denied tenure by the same institution a year later. Rather than remain at Columbia, he taught at the Manhattan School of Music throughout the 1970s and later at Rutgers. He belonged to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and was commissioned by the New York City Opera, New York City Ballet, San Francisco Symphony, and Boston Symphony Orchestra. A late triumph was his operatic setting of *Brokeback Mountain*.

Aside from these academic and professional successes, our three composers—Martino, Sessions, and Wuorinen—also share a common aesthetic. Specifically, their music is rooted in serialism and predominately atonal in character. Sessions, who was initially influenced by the neo-Classicism of Igor Stravinsky, befriended Schoenberg when they were both living in California in the late 1940s. Within the decade, Sessions had begun integrating aspects of Schoenberg's twelve-tone method into his existing idiom, always insisting the method was more a tool for him than an aesthetic in itself. Stravinsky and Copland made similar usage of the method at this time while his pupil Babbitt would instead endeavor to transform serialism into an encompassing aesthetic statement. Martino for his part transplanted the essentially tonal ideas of Heinrich Schenker to his atonal aesthetic, developing layers of structure in which pitch-class sets are distinguished by differences in register, dynamics, and tone production. Wuorinen, who borrowed his transparent instrumental textures from Stravinsky, re-established the pitch hierarchies of tonal music without compromising an atonal, serially-derived language. Wuorinen, however, has disparaged tonality's continued usefulness as an idiom in itself: "While the tonal system, in an atrophied or vestigial form, is still used today in popular and commercial music, and even occasionally in the works of backward-looking serious composers… it has been replaced or succeeded by the twelve-tone system, first initiated by Schoenberg, subsequently developed into a world of chromaticism." And, when hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize, Wuorinen called the occasion "the final disappearance of any societal interest in high culture."

Tonight's program begins with Martino's *Parisonatina al'dodecafonìa*, a 1964 work for solo cello. The cellist Aldo Parisot was the dedicatee and first performer; the composition's title references his name while its music expands on a derived motto. Martino commented on the difficulty of his music, "It may be at the margin of playability for most performers at a given point in time, but ultimately it is negotiable." Indeed, he protested when some of the original challenges he had posed to Parisot were overcome and made to look easy by later players: "The strain, the stress, is all part of the expressive content of the piece." *Parisonatina* is in four brief movements. In the First, *Agitato*, register and timbral devices indicated with special noteheads setup a polyphonic structure which Martino likened to a conversation between six participants. The Second Movement, *Scherzevole*, reorients this conversation, so that timbral devices now distinguish successive sections in the manner of a rondo. The Third Movement, *Motto. Agitato*, is lyrical while the Fourth Movement, *Cadenza sul Nome*, makes room for limited improvisation. To accomplish this, Martino notated a "chart," as he called it, meant to guide performers in their own realization of this material; he also provided a "sample solution" for performers who do not wish to improvise. With the success of *Parisonatina*, its dedicatee requested a concerto, although Krosnick, not Parisot, would eventually give the larger work's premiere.

Next we hear Six Pieces for solo cello by Sessions. This set was composed in 1966 between his Sixth and Seventh Symphonies and dedicated to his son, John, an accomplished cellist who later taught at Smith College. John gave its premiere at an all-Sessions concert held at Carnegie Hall on March 31, 1968 by the International Society for Contemporary Music. Krosnick, before performing Six Pieces himself at Juilliard, speculated on the set's biographical elements, describing *Dialogue* as a friendly conversation between father and son and *Berceuse* as a lullaby for Sessions's granddaughter. In order, the Six Pieces are *Prelude*, *Dialogue*, *Scherzo*, *Berceuse*, *Fantasy*, and *Epilogue*. These are familiar titles which will be self-explanatory to most listeners. Our last piece tonight was also the latest written—Wuorinen's *Cello Variations II*, composed in 1975. This work, like much of Wuorinen's cello music, grew out of the composer's friendship with the cellist Fred Sherry. Known for his advocacy of new music, Sherry has been a member of Wuorinen's Group for Contemporary Music and has co-founded his own ensembles, Speculum Musicae and the Tashi Quartet. As Wuorinen explained of *Cello Variations II*, "These are variations in the 'modern' sense: the piece is a continuously self-transforming fabric in which the initial materials (reminiscences of celloish behavior from past music) are reprocessed into new entities." Indeed, unlike either Martino's *Parisonatina* or the Six Pieces by Sessions, Wuorinen's *Cello Variations II* does not possess internal divisions and continues unfolding, uninterrupted across its ten-minute span.

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a freelance concert annotator based in Alexandria, LA. He serves as Director of Scholarship to the Sugarmill Music Festival and as Marketing Chair to the Chamber Music Society of Louisville. A project he is developing for next May's Sugarmill Music Festival, "A Scholarly Presentation in Lecture and Music: Solomon Northup in the Central Louisiana Sugarhouse," has been awarded a prestigious Rebirth Grant by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. As of August 2020, Jackson has begun a Master's of Library Science with a specialization in Music Librarianship at Indiana University where he is the recipient of a May Copeland Fellowship and participates in the Midwest Chapter of the Music Library Association. Previously Jackson earned an M.M. in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville with a thesis entitled, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." There he was a recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Anderson Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection of Contemporary Music. Jackson has shared research at two meetings of the South-Central Chapter of the American Musicological Society; the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival; the Music by Women Festival; and the University of Louisiana System Academic Summit. Aside from his studies, Jackson is a music blogger, composer, choral singer, avid reader, and award-winning nature photographer.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.