

Metamorphosis of sound

Jay Schwartz



In your compositions there is very often something like a metamorphosis, it is like a central theme. Where does it come from?

Schwartz: The aspect of metamorphosis in my composition has a great deal to do with time and is about not revealing the material to the listener immediately; through this I aim to achieve a very high level of suspense, which is difficult to maintain compositionally: to deliver only very small portions of motivic material at the beginning of a composition and let the material develop as if it were an organic process taking place right before the listener. I think perhaps the metamorphosis aspect of my music also comes from a certain wish to narrate theatrically. When I tell a story, I do not want to tell the listener at the beginning what is going to happen later on. So I start very slowly; and when you tell a story dramatically, you want to start with a slow tempo and few but important details, so that the listener feels the suspense of what could happen and of what might unfold. And I believe that the listener is then rewarded when finally something very large unfolds, and, having endured this metamorphosis, the listener experiences a sense of suspense and at the same time a sense of satisfaction.

You once mentioned that this is a kind of open manipulation of the audience.

Schwartz: Yes. There is something about using a form that is based on metamorphosis that could be considered slightly manipulating – manipulating the audience to come with the composer in a certain direction. Although manipulation can be understood as negative in many contexts. Perhaps manipulation in this context could be understood as narrating or luring, so that a conscious voice exists and not merely a collection of coincidences or random events. There is a voice outside the audience that is definitely a strong, determining factor of how these next 20 minutes will be formed acoustically. And this is the kind of manipulation that I believe the audience is pulled into, or I could even say seduced into, letting themselves go and experience the suspense of the narration. Of course, if one goes against that, it obviously does not have to work. But I think that perhaps a certain open audience could find it difficult to resist going with the composition. I often get reactions from audiences, where they say: “It does not stop. I could not escape the pull of the music.”

When you talk about taking the audience on a journey, not every audience is capable of this, because of the language composers use. What kind of musical language do you use to hook the audience?

Schwartz: Music is an art that is very much based on memory, how well does a listener remember what happened one minute ago, two minutes ago, three minutes ago. How well can a listener retain previous acoustical events throughout the rest of the composition in order to understand the structure. It is like telling a story: for example a character or an event I may have described in the narration three minutes ago is of course important for understanding the rest of the narration. In music it is the same – it may be more abstract, but an audience that has a lot of experience with listening to longer forms will of course retain more of the form while listening to the music; this is not something that is necessarily natural-born, so I would say that I disagree with the statement that music is necessarily a universal language. On the other hand I use acoustic phenomena in my compositions that move many listeners at a very instinctual level, without reducing the demands on the listener and without reducing the quality of the music.

*“Today’s music is new and at the same time a part of The
Universal Work.”*

Ruskin Watts, with whom you have worked for "Music for Voices and Orchestra", once wrote that "Schwartz is obsessed with the archaic primal scream of sound". "Music for Orchestra II" which is related to "Music for Voices and Orchestra" has just been performed in Vienna at Wien Modern 2012. What was your obsession there?

Schwartz: Music for Orchestra II is based on a form that in the last years has offered me an inspiring compositional structure and has enabled me to generate a strong drive on the temporal and harmonic levels. One could call this geometrically based form a chiasma, an X. The skeleton of this composition is very simple to define. You have something that starts extremely high, so high that we would say it is not really tone, it is almost just white noise, and it becomes very slowly something that we can understand as a concrete pitch; and we have almost simultaneously something that starts very deep and very low. These two lines slowly but audibly move towards each other, so that an audience will intuitively feel the pull of the approaching consonant intervals and will think, "When will the lines collide?" And that was my intention. I carried out numerous experiments with synthesisers using sine-waves and manipulating the tempo and the intervalic relationships to compose this skeletal form out of just two extremely reduced lines. It becomes very suspenseful and exciting to hear the lines approach each other through consonances and dissonances to the ultimate consonance as they actually reach a unison. And then, as if going backwards, they part ways.

In some of your compositions you use texts. However, your use of the text is never a conventional one.

Schwartz: I have generally used voices in my compositions instrumentally, avoiding conventionally transmitting an understandable text. This may come from my affinity to early vocal music, Gregorian chant and especially to 15th and 16th century polyphonic music, where it was not necessarily the intention of the composer to transmit an understandable and narrated text; they were composing structures with vowels and melismas that were often taking the text out of its liturgical context, in many instances to the dismay of the Church. My aesthetic approach is to separate the syntax from the oral sensitivity of words and syllables, to take a word out of its context and hear the beauty of the sounds, especially the vowels and to put that into a musical context.

In which context do you prefer to see your music programmed?

Schwartz: I am very interested in programmes that bring contemporary pieces together with classical pieces, which can be successful for both contemporary and classical music. There are philosophical theories that say that every piece of art that we create today, every piece of poetry written today actually changes “The Collective”, that is, all art of the past and present together. Every poet today is adding to the content of the “Universal Work” that, for example, Shakespeare wrote for as well. Today’s music is new and at the same time a part of The Universal Work.

Interview: Eric Marinitsch