



Wednesday 12 August 2020: 19:30

An Introduction from Sean:

Bach and 20th century music underpinned my training, but I didn't jump head on into programming contemporary and early music alongside one another until 2014, shortly after I'd graduated from the RCS. Here is the programme that launched me into this:

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|-------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| John Dowland | 1563 - 1626 | Forlorn Hope Fancy, Fantasia |
| J.S. Bach | 1685 - 1760 | Prelude, Fugue and Allegro |
| Hans Werner Henze | 1926 - 2012 | Drei Tentos (Homage to Britten) |
| Benjamin Britten | 1913 - 1976 | Nocturnal after John Dowland |

I remember being struck by the willing and almost organic interplay between the music of the 20th century composers and their perceived musical ancestors: Britten looking back to Dowland as the first master of English song; Henze to "What I imagined hellenism would sound like"- a pagan counterpoint to Bach's trinitarian allusion. This is all very well, but asides being pleased with myself for establishing some sense of cogency over that 60 minute recital, I'm not sure that I actually understood what I found comforting about it.

To be clear, I still don't. Yet, this juxtaposition of ancient and modern has become a trope that has followed me around over the last five years or so. It's not that I set out to only play music written before 1750 and after 1920 - but it has been the case that the vast majority of the concerts that I give involve pieces solely from these time frames.

Why do I do this? have several hypotheses, which range from the pretentious to... the pretentious.

- 1) **Contemporary composers often look to the ancient for inspiration.** Programming ancient music alongside the modern pieces that reference them is the natural conclusion of regularly engaging in contemporary music.
- 2) **Ancient music is the best foil for the contemporary.** I earnestly feel that if we don't programme contemporary music enough, we end up as historians and not radicals. If I must programme the contemporary and the radical - how best to contextualise it? If too isolated, the radical becomes abstract fluff (the revolution needs direction!). Only in historical context can one measure iconoclasm. So, while it may seem that the ancient is programmed to make the modern more *palatable* (Bach to sweeten the bitter pill of a yucky commission!), counter-intuitively the ancient actually serves to *heighten* modernity.
- 3) **Maybe I hate the guitar.** But not in the way you think I do! I resent that the instrument is overwhelmingly known for its 19th Century Spanish miniature repertoire. It's not that this music isn't any good - on the contrary! It's just that there are so many other interesting things about the guitar which end up overshadowed by this relatively minor episode. So I admit it! You caught me!

To some extent. I'm probably rebelling against this! I often wonder that if I played a bowed string instrument I would be more inclined to spend my life in the classical and romantic period...

But, in any case, each instrument has its own peaks to summit, and the guitar is in pressing need of good new music. Consider the guitar as Barthesian 'sign'. One might be inclined to nostalgically imagine the romantic heroism of Spain; but look further back, to the guitar as the instrument of the peasant not the noble, an aesthetic not ecclesiastical but arcadian. In this way the guitar can be seen as a 'sign' of protest from its beginnings; the natural vehicle for radical musical ideas. When not grounded in one brief period, the instrument becomes fecund, expansive and - potentially - revelatory. In short, I despise the guitars 'sign', which begs for liberation. Only in this way can it be recast in the popular consciousness!

- 4) **Am I faking it?** Am I *really* interested in the aesthetics of the old and the new - or is it more that I'm interested in what they have in common, and therefore search for the most modern examples of old music/the most ancient of the contemporary? Is this a way to place myself in historical context? Or do I find it reassuring to build a long form spiritual narrative between a time long ago and my life today?

Now that I've gone too far, it's time to reel it in for question time...

Questions to Consider While Listening:

- **What are the drawbacks of programming in these juxtapositions?** Audiences can walk out, for starters!
- **Why is ancient and modern something that works, if it does at all?**
I've given 4 ideas of why it works for me, but I'm curious about your opinions on why it would work/might not work for you. Could you level the accusation that this style of programming can be pretentious? A superficial profundity? The below 'Kol Nidrei' maybe pertinent here... If you're on my side, play devil's advocate!
- **To what extent can ancient music sound modern/the modern sound ancient?**
- **Which interpreters and programmers do ancient/modern well?**
Perhaps a more pertinent question is "can it be done badly?". For sure, it's a matter of taste. Does it matter if inauthentic instruments are placed into period ensembles, if the quality of the end result is high enough?
- **What similarities do old and new musics have?**
Are there interpretative challenges and contextual understandings that exist for both these musics?
- **Are there themes that consistently crop up with this juxtaposition?**
Perhaps there's room for this style of programming to become repetitive.

Listening Links:

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| John Dowland: | Forlorn Hope Fancy | 1600 |
| Santiago de Murcia | Santiago de Murcia codex , performed by Rolf Lislevand | 1730 |
| J.S. Bach: | Incomplete Contrapunctus from Art of Fugue, BMV 1080 (Historically-informed performance by Phantasm) | 1751 |
| Benjamin Britten: | Nocturnal after John Dowland for guitar , Op. 70 | 1963 |
| | Lachrymae for Viola and Piano | 1948 |
| Hans Werner Henze: | Kammermusik 1958 (dedicated to Benjamin Britten) | 1958 |
| Peter Maxwell Davies | Hill Runes <i>a response to the poetry of George Mackay Brown</i> <i>(overleaf, itself a response to Norse myth/haiku)</i> | 1981 |
| John Zorn | Kol Nidre | 1996 |
| Rolf Lislevand | Nuove Musiche | 2006 |
| Georges Lentz | Ingwe <i>a “devastating meditation on God’s silence” which the composer sees as a cousin to Bach’s famous Chaconne in D Minor for solo violin.</i> | 2007 |
| Patricia Kopatchinskaja | What’s Next Vivaldi? | 2020 |

Hill Runes

Thirst

Horse at trough, thrush in quernstone,
The five ploughmen
Much taken up with pewter.

Elder

Andrew who has read the gospel
Two or three times
Has quizzed the clay book also, furrow by furrow.

Smithy

The forge flames, the hammerings, glowings,
End one way –
A cold nail on an anvil.

Kirkyard

Between stone poem and skull
April
Touches rat, spade, daffodil.