

Notes on the Composition of Grand Tango for Solo Violin and its Video

Grand Tango for Solo Violin is a piece that is formed around two traditions, the tango, and the Bach/Paganini solo violin repertoire. When Karen Bentley Pollick asked me if I had any solo violin music and I suggested writing a tango for her, I had already been thinking about what a solo string instrument Tango would sound like. It had to be intense, focused and driven by ferociously rhythmic material with a few interludes between the climaxes and I wanted a soaring theme to climax it, not a driven theme.

I started writing Tangos two years earlier as a new form to explore which was ecstatic and intensely dramatic with energies generated by a kind of spectacular musical violence. Having grown up within the fantastically diverse musical culture of New Orleans, Louisiana, I am very familiar with the Tango rhythm. The 3:3:2 syncopation forms the basis for many of the bass lines of the great blues pianist Professor Longhair. The popular song, Tipitina is a great example. These types of syncopated rhythms have informed my motivic writing since the late 80's in my search for unexplored rhythmic and melodic combinations.

I started the piece on December 3, 2010, the morning after a few online conversations with Ms. Pollick. The first motives of the music for Grand Tango came together very quickly. As soon as I decided on the material and settled upon an opening, the piece was finished in 6 days. I had a rough draft to show on the 9th. I look back at that period as one of intense excitement and inspiration because I knew I could write almost anything that was violinistic and Ms. Pollick would be able to pull it off. I had been exploring creating the illusion of multiple lines, as Bach does, with single instrument since the late 80's, but here was a performer who would let me experiment with the extremes of that type of compositional problem.

One problem with writing fiery virtuoso pieces, is of the listener experience of virtuosity. The listener becomes overwhelmed by the physical display of sheer technique and ceases to be focused on the music. But, texture changes within the flow of a dramatic single instrument narrative are problematic. It is extremely difficult to create a dramatic playground then, after a series of spectacular runs or a section of combination double-stops and large registral jumps, to go back to a poetic single line of music convincingly. Multi-movement, single texture pieces are the norm for solo virtuosic pieces but I wanted this piece to be in a single movement.

Additionally, I wanted to remain within the parameters I try to keep in my music: that of having the material, melodic and motivic units in their deepest aspects drive the musical discourse. The material has to have its dramatic implications be inevitably realized through the continuity of the music. So any virtuosity had to be a requisite part of the unfolding of that material. And, finally, I wanted the piece, like all of my compositions, to hide the signifiers of its production. I am interested in the creation of a musical world which has, inherently, its own fantastical self-destruction implicit within the imperatives of its content at all scales of differentiation, and one created so that this little universe is additionally allowed to contain a great doubt about the existence of its creator.

Before I got interested in composing, while in high school, I was introduced to Zen Buddhism by a freshman friend. I was introduced to the writings of John Cage at that time while wandering through the Buddhist book aisles of an Oak Street bookstore and stumbling upon a copy of his book, Silence. When I became seriously interested in composing, his thoughts and my continuing Zen meditation practice seemed to be in conflict with my aspirations as a composer. How does the composer create works in this post-romantic age which do not reek of the smell of the composer behind the scenes pulling the strings of musical puppets? It would only be later in my life that I would realize that if Cage had sought a type of egoless organization of sound, I was looking for a form of egoless expression within a traditional musical narrative as an extension of the work of Bach and the late works of Beethoven; a musical third-person narrative where the narrator is not a participant.

Since the late 80's I have been attempting to create a stripped down musical language that can allow for the creation of a music that has a potentially both innovative and a dramatically inevitable quality to it. I have always been interested in extremes of momentum and ecstatic climaxes and these are problematic when using complex musical languages. My theory has always been that if you keep the language simple, it allows both the external, audible process of the music and the internal workings to be more complex and most importantly, more intelligible. I have always believed that the first

responsibility of a composer is to treat the material with respect and not depend on moments of incoherence to be exploited as developmental devices. And the energies of the music needed to seem to come directly from the inherent instabilities in the material itself, not from the composer's will. This illusion creates a willfulness in the music which is egoless and expansive. And by simplifying my musical language it allows me to spend time on the actual creation of content and transitions rather than language innovations, because finding new motives to base pieces on with these qualities is extremely time-consuming and difficult.

So, finally, I decided that if I could find a simplified language that could be used in a traditional manner but with new rhythms, harmonies and syncopations then I could create the seemingly impossible: a new narrative, melodic and immersive music outside of the neoclassical tradition that would be able to express egolessness through its own internal momentums. The qualities inherent in the unfolding of the content and the dramatic energies of both the music and the performers would be the driving forces behind the music, not the illusion of the will of the composer.

The video I created for Grand Tango was a fantastic opportunity to return to an art form I had experimented with since the late 80's. Then I had made videos to go with my electronic music using early computers like the Amiga 1000 combined with early graphics software. Here was my chance to use the most sophisticated effects available to today's video artists. I chose a Tango video from Archive.org that was free for re-use. It had been a fairly sophisticated video to begin with, using multiple cameras and reverse-colorings as it had been used for the backdrop of an art event. I immediately began experimenting with its visuals by dumping the entire video to a set of individual frames. I then began running various custom software filters over the images and putting them back together. I chose 10 salient moments within a recording Ms. Pollock had given to me for the timing goals and there I put strategically dramatic texture changes. I decided to focus on an hallucinogenic approach that would showcase the ecstatic states I was exploring in the piece. Throughout the video I use symmetrical image placement to enhance that shamanistic effect and help integrate the musical experience of the composition so that the video dancers, distorted into gigantic deities of color and projected onto the violinist, transform the entire sound and light experience into a fantastic ritual dance.

January 19, 2013

Jeffrey Harrington

Avignon, France