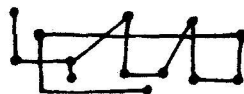
The Recent Music of Charles Wuorinen

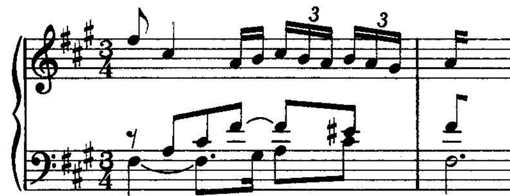


Jeffrey Kresky

The Bach prelude (*Well-Tempered Clavier*, II) that begins as in Example 1 comes thirty-three measures later to Example 2, thereby achieving a momentary stasis in the bass (against a cooperating repetition in the first two treble beats) that is so striking because the entirety of the texture up to now (as well as, for that matter, the remaining nine measures of the piece) has been, like the opening measure, one of constant motion and change in all parts. Thus, the progress here seems suddenly arrested, with the tense insistence of a tangled string suddenly yanked taut.

Charles Wuorinen's music over the past thirty years has gradually but firmly drawn a line between points that resemble the contrasting moments of the Bach prelude, and in the same direction. Curiously, this progress can be succinctly heard over the course of a single composition written roughly in the middle of this three-decades' span. *Arabia Felix*, an eleven-minute chamber piece for flute,

violin, bassoon, vibraphone, electric guitar and piano composed in 1973, spends much of its time making music by way of gestures that, casually heard, may seem fairly disconnected, scattered, or random (Example 3). Of course more informed listening begins to reveal continuity of various kinds from the outset; but about halfway through, certain unmistakable signs of a surface coalescing begin to appear in the form of segments of a recognizably continuous and conjunct "tunes" played in unison (or in a kind of heterophony). Startlingly, by four-fifths of the way through, the texture has become fully tuneful and monophonic, to the point even of a single one-staff melody line written out in score and labeled "à 6" (Example 4).



EXAMPLE 1

EXAMPLE 2

m.169

Fl.

Vln.

Bn.

Vibr.

Pno.

EXAMPLE 3

m.267

Tutti a 6

EXAMPLE 4

This unification at the surface entails not just the reduction in the number of things going on at once, but also the comparative simplicity of the remaining gesture. Both these features are quite striking characteristics of Wuorinen's music as it has evolved recently—all the more so to those who have followed his prodigious and energetic production over its entire span, for the earlier music in general resembles in many respects the earlier portions of *Arabia* (the antithesis, that is, of the styling later to emerge).

Born in 1938, Wuorinen produced a great deal of "derivative" music until around 1956, music now essentially excluded by him from his official oeuvre. Since that time he has written some 160 pieces, large and small, chamber, orchestral, stage works, and so forth. On the surface, these works earlier on presented a fierce, quite forbidding severity in all domains: pitches tended to occur in relative temporal and spatial isolation, or in small groupings; dynamics and articulations changed angularly; timbral uniformity and rhythmic regularity were to a certain extent avoided. Here is a typical moment from that period, drawn from the *Chamber Concerto for Cello and Ten Players*, a sixteen-minute composition written in 1963 (Example 5), wherein a possibly discomfiting sense of disorder is fostered by the multiplicity of simultaneous events of very different kinds, the disjunctness in all variables, the lack of discernible underlying pulse.

But even from a naive point of view, the seeds of order and declarative simplicity were essentially always present. Wuorinen's older pieces very often displayed gesturally direct announcements at the very beginning, or at the very end, or both. The long stretch between would then likely be in the less cordial manner. *Ringing Changes*, a percussion ensemble written in 1970, rewards its listeners' considerable difficulties along the way with a spectacular disentanglement at the end: timpani alone descends a six-note scale in long, slow *mf* tones. Both the texture and the gesture are the more impressive for their uniqueness in terms of the hectic activity, of the less connected sort, that has preceded throughout. (But in fact, one can use this six-pitch line to work one's way back one step into the fray, for it can be heard as an immediate straightening out of the two ensemble chords—each of three different notes—that immediately precede: these tones are extracted from the chords and rearranged into stepwise adjacency.)

Similarly, in the *String Trio* (1967–8), a drone G present at the beginning, around which disjunct and irregular gestures occur, returns towards the end, after so much difficult material, in the context of an (occasionally interrupted) even quarter-note ensemble motion (itself a severe rhythmic clarification, supplying a pulse until then largely absent); and then at the very end a solo G thumps along very plainly.

But throughout the pieces of the 1970s and 1980s, this initiating and concluding tendency toward dramatic straightforwardness has been slowly encroaching upon the main body of the pieces, so that the newer compositions, even those of very ambitious orchestral scope and size, are sounding "easier" all the way

EXAMPLE 5

through. This accessibility is offered in all dimensions, reducing seeming surface disorder to order: isolated pitches are rare, compared to "gestures" of a clearly memorable, motivic sort (whether or not treated motivically); linear extravagance is replaced with "tunes" of registral, intervallic and rhythmic compactness; a regular pulse often informs the surface for very long stretches. And there is dynamic and timbral revision along these same lines: periods of steady dynamic utterance as opposed to—at the most extreme—a change in loudness for each attack; and many pitches in a row in the same instrumental voice. Thus, an expanded picture of the point to which *Arabia* seems to come after it has otherwise sounded much like the earlier pieces.

Among the most recent compositions one finds an unusually large percentage of major pieces, reflecting the composer's always increasing integration into the mainstream international concert world (a shift perhaps not unrelated to these tendencies of manner): there is a Third Piano Concerto of 26½ minutes' length; a fifteen-minute *Short Suite for Orchestra*; a thirty-minute *Mass*; an orchestral piece with tape, *Bamboula Squared* (16½ minutes); another large orchestra piece called *Movers and Shakers*, lasting twenty-seven minutes; a *Concertino for Orchestra* of sixteen minutes; a *Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra* that lasts 19½ minutes; and, just now appearing, two further orchestra pieces, *Crossfire* and *The Golden Dance*, the latter lasting half an hour.

The Piano Concerto typifies and extends what I have been observing in these pieces. Extended passages of small timbral subsets of the orchestra at the outset present a most pronounced pre-simplification of the potentially wild orchestral palette: piano alone for a very long time, then piano and drums, piano and harp, and the like. The piece is plainly rhapsodic in mood, offers a great many instances of literally repeated measures (an effect I can still find startling, in this regard, even at the end of the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto*), and even eight-note stepwise scales. The inventively streamlined timbral situations, in particular, seem to parallel the changes in the other aspects of the music in a way that invokes the composer's old fondness for alternative instrumental color: piano and harp is not the same as, say, extended string section music if prolonged timbral uniformity is wanted in an orchestral setting—and the choice seems clear when one recalls such an early piece as *The Politics of Harmony*, a stage work from 1967, in which the scoring for flutes, piccolo, alto flutes, tubas, percussion, piano, harps, and pairs of violins and contrabasses assures a continual if fluctuating timbral oddness.

Such thoroughgoing coordinated changes raise the question of comparable alterations in background compositional considerations that they may be reflecting, a matter not feasibly addressed without direct consultation with the composer. Wuorinen flatly states that his underlying structural and procedural concerns remain precisely the same as they have been over a considerably long stretch of his output: namely the establishment of a piece-long general structure involving both in pitch and in time a single twelve-tone set that influences, again

in pitch and in time, and in ways that vary from piece to piece and certainly vary from classical twelve-tone practice, the course and detail of the piece at all levels. In particular, given Wuorinen's oft-stated interest in a reconciliation of the general twelve-tone way with the tonal past, this scheme may in the large involve various kinds of "tonicization" of these successive underlying set pitches, as well as the more fundamental promotion of the zero pitch of the set. (Indeed, even in earlier pieces his sets tend to unfold slowly at first, often with special emphasis on the first pitch, which is likely to be heard in this way again at the end.)

Whether this quasi-tonal aim or the more general quest for rapprochement of which it is a part in some way have suggested to the composer the surface simplifications we are witnessing in his music, Wuorinen does acknowledge that, if the background has not changed, the stylistic manner in which the surface interprets that background has—in terms, at least, of an overall economy of means. But he is quick to admit that this notion of "the simpler the better" is not a philosophical position, but an emerging aesthetic preference.

These ideas, and their realization in the music, may have important implications for the course of our music since the tonal era. For the return to pulse, tune and the like in music such as Wuorinen's may be emblematic of a restoration of some of the most cherished outward features of tonality that it may have been necessary to eschew for a time, in order to confront and project with any chance of success the radically different backgrounds, grammars and even fundamental premises being adopted or attempted since Schönberg. Indeed, Wuorinen speaks of a wish to "re-embrace the past" in connection with his notions of structural and systematic mixture. Such surface changes as I have been discussing, whether or not perceptibly in that service, would seem at any rate to re-embrace the audience as well, for standard concert audiences, such as would normally hear the big orchestral works mentioned above, would be confronting more comfortably inviting shapes among the noises. Wuorinen admits to the possibility of readier acceptance in this trend in his recent music, and although he does not consider it a chief aim, he is perfectly glad of it.

But further along these lines, it seems to me that this music is best appreciated in context—in the context of the whole evolution of twentieth-century music, and, more locally, in the unfolding context of Wuorinen's own work and the milieu which has nourished it and which it has so markedly nourished in turn. Thus, the end of *Arabia Felix* packs its best punch when heard at the end of the piece that otherwise behaves as *Arabia Felix* does. In the same way, the later Wuorinen pieces may best be heard if one knows and has wrestled with his earlier music. Otherwise, one might consider that ultimate "straightening" seen in today's minimalism, where it is not clear what is being simplified, or whether the simplification is a denial rather than a reward, a simplemindedness rather than an elucidation, in a musical landscape already terribly flat before the music begins.

But in whatever direction these welcome reshapings may be aimed, more

technical questions will have to be addressed. Thinking back to the example in Bach, one realizes that that moment of suspended intricacy precisely and purposely thrusts the chord of the Neapolitan sixth at us, thereby trapping and intensifying the energy that will presumably be delivered and released into the cadential dominant that customarily results (if, in this instance, in a particularly twisted and diverted way). Are there, will there be, rich and manifold functional workings, comparable to those we lost somewhere between tonal backgrounds and tonal surfaces, to lead us from some "centric" view of set pitches to these attractive surface moments? Only gradually may we know more, after many more pieces, and countless hearings, alongside theoretical speculation and development. Meanwhile, we have the kinder surface, with its promise of accessibility, warmth and connectedness. It is much to put one's hopes in, in terms of what Godfrey Winham once disturbingly referred to as "the not improbable circumstance of the failure of serious music to survive." No composer fights more against that unacceptable possibility directly through his music than Wuorinen.