

Salt Bay Chamberfest – August 18, 2017

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA *Dancer on a Tightrope*

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH Cello Suite No. 3 in C major, BWV 1009 - with dancer

JOHN NOVACEK *4th Street Drag* and *Intoxication* - with dancer

PYOTR TCHAIKOVSKY Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50

About the primal necessity of dance and its relationship to time, pioneer of modern dance Martha Graham once wrote: “All that is important is this one moment in movement. Make the moment important, vital, and worth living. Do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused.” Although chamber music has evolved as a higher-level abstraction, the very words we use to describe aspects of music derive from the inherent associations with motion. Pieces are divided into “movements,” an allusion to the species of dance customary at certain tempos and time signatures. Tonight’s performance lays these parallels out in the open, with music derived from the dance reunited with an actual dancer in unexpected ways.

The title of Sofia Gubaidulina’s piece invites a listener to create a mental image of a high-wire artist. The truth of the matter is that in musical performance, tightropes are everywhere. What is a violin but four tight ropes that confront and confound the fingers each time a violinist reaches for the strings, with a bow that balances precariously across them? A pianist’s hands must rapidly jump and bounce about among hundreds of tightly wound wires, landing on just the right combinations. Gubaidulina goes even further, extending the image for us all:

[The piece is] a metaphor for opposition, life as risk and art as flight into another existence. The title stems from a desire to break away from the confines of everyday life, inevitably associated with risk and danger. The desire to take flight, for the exhilaration of movement, of dance, of ecstatic virtuosity.

On the violin, repeated notes ascend, gliding upward into the unknown. The pianist strikes and rubs the strings of the piano with a glass, dragging the serrated edge along the wound texture of the bass strings. The use of glass is emblematic of the brittle fragility that is the subconscious undercurrent of every acrobatic performance. In the middle of the work, a lighter texture prevails, with pizzicato (violin) and harmonics (piano). Finally, the pianist moves to the keyboard, creating crashing, threatening clusters while, in the composer’s words:

All these events are overcome by the violinist in an ecstatic dance that ascends finally to the upper register of the instrument to tremolo double harmonics; risk, overcoming, the flight of fantasy, art, dance.

The Baroque suite, whether for keyboard or orchestra, is an assortment of well-known dances in a common key progressing through a generally accelerating series of tempos. The miraculous Suites for Solo Cello by J. S. Bach manage to show off the multifarious possibilities of the instrument while retaining the spirit of the dance, as is amply displayed in these three movements from the Third Suite. The Courante is a lively dance in triple meter, while the Sarabande is serious and sensual. The Bouree is a quick-step in duple meter, with a leg-lifting upbeat.

John Novacek has toured the world as a pianist performing music from the standard repertory, from Bach to the present day. He has also kept the flame alive, both as a performer and a composer, for a singularly American form of music and dance: ragtime. This form, which is most

closely associated with Scott Joplin, persisted well into the 20th century and overlapped with the beginnings of jazz. Novacek's *Intoxication* is virtuosic while striding, syncopating, and "ragging" notes in the spirit of Fats Waller's "Handful of Keys" or "Honeysuckle Rose." *4th Street Drag* is more a traditional rag, with a lazy, melodic right hand over a slowly striding left in the tradition of "Stardust" or "By the Light of the Silvery Moon."

Ballet represents the ultimate artistic form of dance and Tchaikovsky's works have become virtually synonymous with the genre. Even his concert music makes frequent use of common dance forms such as the waltz, mazurka, and polonaise. Such music on a grand scale suited him ideally, but his confidence occasionally faltered when he tried to write for smaller forces. When he finally succumbed to the temptation to compose a trio, he wrote:

I am afraid, having written all my life for orchestra, and only taken late in life to chamber music, I may have failed to adapt the instrumental combinations to my musical thoughts. In short, I fear I may have arranged music of a symphonic character as a trio, instead of writing directly for the instruments.

The two-movement, 40-minute trio is indeed symphonic in scope and intensity—gloriously so. The searing emotionalism of the opening movement is an indication that this work is not for performers faint of heart and demands the utmost of their technique, musicality, expression, and stamina. The piano part in particular approaches concerto-like brilliance.

The second movement manages to be both of the utmost clarity in form—12 variations on a theme plus a coda/finale—and the most extreme romantic fantasia, with variations that take the original idea into distant derivations that feel almost like complete movements. The calm, song-like theme for piano solo is comprised of two six-bar phrases followed by one eight-bar phrase. Variation 3 is quasi-scherzando in the piano with pizzicato accompaniment. Variation 4 features lyricism in the strings, while Variation 5, pianissimo in a high tessitura for the keyboard against held notes in the strings, bears a resemblance to Variation 3, implying an ABA form.

Variation 6 breaks free from the confines of the structure to become a movement-scale waltz that leads to Variation 7, a chorale of victory. By Variation 8, we hear morsels of the theme, melodic fragments and harmonic progressions turned into the basis for an extended fugue that is more developmental in character than anything that has gone before (and is written in expert counterpoint, unlike what we often encounter in Tchaikovsky's music). Variation 9 is marked "Feeble, but not too much," clearly a respite and reaction to the robust music that has come before. Variation 10 is a Mazurka, improvisatory, decorated elaborately, and molto rubato. Variation 11 returns closely to the original structure.

At this point we have reached what Tchaikovsky has marked as part "B" of the movement, the Final Variation and Coda. The theme is treated to quasi-symphonic elaboration far beyond what a variation traditionally consists of. When the theme returns in a recognizable form, it feels like a recapitulation. Over a long pedal, Tchaikovsky telegraphs a final cadence that is by now leaning decidedly toward a minor key, which, when it arrives, is harrowingly tragic. The sustained string lines sing with tormented anguish and the athletic flourishes in the piano vent a cathartic grief. The climactic paroxysm gradually ebbs. The voices converge on a low A minor harmony for a

brief funeral march that features a quote from the melody at the very beginning of the work, one that reveals a kinship between that solemn phrase and the heroic theme of the finale.

By Mark Mandarano