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Author

Worthington, Scott

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Shadows of Romanticism

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Scott Thomas Worthington

Committee in Charge:

Professor Mark Dresser, Chair
Professor Anthony Burr
Professor Charles Curtis

2011

The Thesis of Scott Thomas Worthington is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Abstract of the Thesis.....	v
Shadows of Romanticism.....	6

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Shadows of Romanticism

by

Scott Thomas Worthington

Master of Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Mark Dresser, Chair

This brief essay acted as program notes to accompany a recital given on April 8, 2011. It argues that while the works by Kurtág, Sciarrino, Xenakis, and myself might have extremely different surfaces, an underlying attention and attraction to 19th century music pervades them. The two-fold nature of shadows is used as a metaphor to describe this interaction.

SHADOWS OF ROMANTICISM

One can think about a shadow as both a presence and an absence. A shadow exists in the sense that we can see it: we can locate it in space and describe its shape. Shadows move—by the wind blowing a cloud, or as a mountain changes position in relation to the sun. But a shadow is also a non-existence: the absence of light. It is the result of an obscuring object, a coming in between.

An artistic shadow might exhibit both of these properties. A work of art could locate and describe that which it obscures. The music on tonight's program seems to interact in this way with music of the past.

§

Despite his relative fame as a composer, Kurtág has spent much of his life as a professor of chamber music rather than of composition. His music is rooted in the classical tradition and in many cases is a kind of shadow of older music. Many of his pieces are dedicated to Schumann or Bach, as well as his own contemporaries, such as Boulez and Nono. His *Bagatelles* for flute, piano, and double bass include movements such as *Hommage à J.S.B.* and *La fille aux cheveux de lin, enrage* (the latter makes obvious aural references to Debussy's original, sans-rage, piece). Beethoven is explicitly invoked in Kurtág's piano concerto from the late 1980s ...*quasi una fantasia*...

A long term project of his (1973-present), compositionally, has been the *Játékok* [Games] for two or four hands piano. The *Bagatelles* mentioned above are comprised of arrangements from this ongoing work. Indeed, Kurtág is often interested in re-arranging works, both his own and others'. He and his wife perform movements of the *Játékok* interspersed with Kurtág's arrangements of Bach. Some of his pieces allow performers to

choose the order of movements and some contain multiple workings out of the same musical material, re-compositions so to speak.

Composed between November 1999 and December 2000 Kurtág's *Signs, Games, and Messages* for double bass are wonderfully representative of these aspects of his work. The first and last pieces are almost identical and were composed days apart. The latin *alio modo* translates roughly as "in some other way." Though tonight performed in its solo version, the piece *Schatten* [Shadows] is also arranged for double bass and pianino (i.e. upright piano).

Each piece of the set offers a reserved, Webernian romanticism. Quiet dynamics erupt suddenly into sustained, cantabile melodies which quickly give way to their predecessors' antics. In a sense, extremes are the norm. For example, *...eine Botschaft an Valérie...* [...a message to Valérie...] opens with the dynamic direction "quasi without contact" and at the end "barely heard." All the pieces' simplicity of gesture gives an air of vulnerability. These are pieces of contrasts of emotions, mood, and opacity.

Sciarrino's oeuvre is dominated by relatively few sounds, mainly so-called extended techniques. These are non-traditional ways of playing an instrument: the sound of the keys clicking on wind instruments, or using the hand to hit the mouth piece of brass, for example. Beyond these techniques, his music is strikingly romantic. The tiny sounds themselves are as complex and luscious as the harmonic movement one might find in Beethoven or Brahms. Sciarinno's dynamic and harmonic planes may be expanded (or, depending on the vantage point, shrunk), but their gestures are constantly emotive.

Composed for the Italian virtuoso Stefano Scodanibbio, *Esplorazione del Bianco I* [*Exploration of the White I*], like much of Sciarrino's string writing, consists almost entirely of natural harmonics. These harmonics are equal-part divisions of the open strings (e.g. half the length, a fifth the length, a ninth of the length). Instead of pressing the string down onto the fingerboard, as in normal playing, when these divisions are accurately found, a very light touch of the string allows these glassy, pure sounds to speak.

The piece unfolds in three large sections: an introduction, a very large middle, and coda. The middle is divided into two halves, each repeated. The first is characterized by large intervallic leaps cut by descending glissandi always beginning from the same note. The second half permutes these descending glissandi by discretizing them (using separated notes to make the descending gesture) as well as disintegrating the patterns of the first half. The introduction contains many of the gestures the piece uses—a three note repetition, glissandi, etc.—perhaps a presentation of the palette. Here the music starts and stops, as though it must find its footing before the more constant playing in the middle. The coda, in method typical of Sciarrino, explores a few techniques and registers which are absent from the rest of the piece, often once. Much like Kurtág's music, Sciarrino pares down the musical surface to reveal a deceptively complex interior. But while Kurtág extracts only the essential shapes, Sciarrino uses many brush strokes.

If anything seems out of place tonight, it would likely be Xenakis' *Theraps*. Composed for Scodanibbio's teacher Fernando Grillo, the piece has practically become standard repertoire for the (increasingly-less-rare) contemporary bass soloist. Excluding the noisy introduction and coda, the piece contrasts two extremes: flux and stasis. Flux

first manifests in the single voice glissandi which appear immediately after the short introduction. These glissandi themselves fluctuate between various dynamics as well as normal and ponticello playing (bowing close to the bridge to accentuate high harmonics). After this first section, static harmonic dyads emerge. These longer durations, at a stable dynamic of piano, and the pure, simple intervals allow the player and the listener to rest for a moment. About half way into the piece these two extremes are combined into fortississimo two-voice glissandi. Each voice is almost always moving, while the dynamic is absolutely stable and abrasive. From this point onward, the three types of music rotate until the coda.

Xenakis is often characterized by his mathematical methods of composing, or even his writing (composing) of computer programs to make compositional decisions. Notes preceding the score state that *Theraps* is “based upon Xenakis’ ‘Random Walk, Brownian Movement’ theory.” To be sure, Xenakis would have devised a scheme to project these mathematical principles in music; he did not discover Brownian movement. His book, *Formalized Music* (completed almost ten years before *Theraps*), offers insight into his early methods and even includes the source code for some of his programs. Yet, the first paragraph of the first chapter places him, perhaps surprisingly, in line with the previous composers:

Art, and above all music, has a fundamental function, which is to catalyze the sublimation that it can bring about through all means of expression. It must aim through fixations which are landmarks to draw towards a total exaltation in which the individual mingles, losing his consciousness in a truth immediate, rare, enormous, and perfect. If a work of art succeeds in this undertaking even for a single moment, it attains its goal. This tremendous truth is not made of objects, emotions, or sensations; it is beyond these, as Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is beyond music. This is why art can lead to realms that religion still occupies for some people.

If Kurtág's and Sciarrino's romanticism has been guarded, reserved, and understated, Xenakis's is overt, amplified, and expanded.

Closing the program tonight is a recent work of mine, *At Dusk*, for bass and digital resonances. Before composing this piece, I had become jealous of pianists' ability to hold the sustain pedal of their instrument down indefinitely, allowing the strings to freely resonate, and hoped to find a way to let the bass resonate in a similar fashion. To this aim, I wrote a simple computer program in SuperCollider to become my sustain pedal. This program places the bass's sound in a faux resonance chamber tuned to the pitches played throughout the piece (for the technically minded, this is done with tuned all pass filters in series—sort of like an intentionally poorly designed Schroeder reverb).

At Dusk is a kind of shadow of the 19th century Nocturne, most directly by its lyrical and free nature. The hazy and fleeting quality of many Nocturnes is itself shadowy as is the idea of a character piece invoking night. The title could be considered a sort of hat tip to these earlier pieces as well as the desire to mimic the resonance of the piano, the most common Nocturne instrument.

The piece is comprised of four larger sections which overlap to form transitions. In addition to the digital resonances, the bass part takes copious advantage of the bass's resonant possibilities through the use of harmonics, open strings, and low pizzicato notes allowed to vibrate until they reach silence. These long-ringing pizzicati subdivide the piece, not necessarily coinciding with the four sections.