**Variation through Commitment, Commitment in Variation**

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG  Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte (Byron) for speaker, piano and string quartet, Op. 41

LUDWIG V. BEETHOVEN  15 Variations with a Fugue in E flat, op. 35 – “Eroica Variations”

FREDERIC RZEWSKI  The People United Will Never Be Defeated!

**‘Why write?’**

‘What Jean-Paul Sartre says in his essay, *What is Literature?*, about the problem “why write?”, is witnessed in utterly authentic fashion in Schoenberg’s creative necessity.’ Luigi Nono’s Darmstadt lecture, from which those words are taken, focused on Schoenberg’s post-war cantata, *A Survivor from Warsaw*, but those words were intended more broadly. Schoenberg’s wartime *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* is as overt a work of ‘political ‘commitment’ as *A Survivor* or any of his posthumous son-in-law’s works, indeed as any work by Beethoven or Frederic Rzewski. In the words of Sartre, as quoted by Nono (himself transcribed by the young Helmut Lachenmann, another composer very much of this ilk): ‘If I am presented with this world and its injustices, then I should not look at it coldly, but ... with indignation, that I might expose it and create it in its nature as injustice and abuse.’

**Denunciation and developing variation**

The day following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in Californian exile from the National Socialism whose genocidal tendencies he had long feared, Schoenberg heard on the wireless Roosevelt’s ‘day of infamy’ address. A month later, in January 1942, the League of Composers, which had previously sponsored the American premiere (under Stokowski) of Schoenberg’s *Die glückliche Hand*, offered him a commission, for its twentieth anniversary, for a ‘short chamber work’, which Schoenberg composed between March and June of that year, although, concerned that it might not be well enough performed by the commissioning forces, Schoenberg withheld it until 1944, when it received its premiere in New York.

The words and their meaning were of great importance to Schoenberg. He hoped, alas vainly, that Orson Welles, whose radio work had greatly impressed him might act as speaker: one of those great musical might-have-beens. Byron’s excoriating ode, allegedly to, yet unmistakeably against, Napoleon, offered a clear contemporary parallel to Hitler. ‘I knew,’ the composer said with specific reference to this work, that ‘it was the moral duty of intelligentsia to take a stand against tyranny.’ Unlike, say, in *Pierrot lunaire*, there is no straightforward cabaret, no sense of recitation as artfulness. The words are to be heard as words, but the mode of their expression is crucial. Schoenberg insisted to another pupil, Heinrich Jalowetz, who was preparing a recording, on the requirement fora large number of ‘shades, essential to express one hundred and seventy kinds of derision, sarcasm, hatred, ridicule, contempt, condemnation, etc., which I tried to portray in my music.’ In that vein, not only might Bonaparte become Hitler, not only might Byron’s reference to the Emperor’s Habsburg bride, ‘proud Austria’s mournful flower’, evoke Schoenberg’s post-Anschluss homeland, but also Byron’s ‘Cincinnatus of the West … bequeath’d the name of Washington’ might yet inspire Roosevelt, whose speech had so inspired Schoenberg at the outset.

Allusions to the *Marseillaise* and to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony – its Morse Code, ‘V for Victory’ connotations especially popular at this time – nevertheless make their musico-dramatic points amongst ‘The triumph and the vanity, the rapture of the strife – the earthquake voice of Victory,’ and the countervailing ‘Dark spirit! what must be the madness of thy memory!’ And yet, for all the post-Wagnerism of Schoenberg’s conception here of the artist and his role in society, of the artistic work and its angry, political standing, it is with a motivic working born of neo-Brahmsian musical integrity, every note and its placing crucial to the composer’s idea of ‘developing variation’, that the score leads shatteringly to a conclusion both encompassing and negating E-flat major. That Schoenbergian struggle between Brahms and Wagner which we can trace back at least as far as the programmatic string sextet, *Verklärte Nacht*, continues to develop, to take on new meaning. We can argue endlessly about when our ears may first lay claim to detect that tonal reference, for there are various ‘traditional’ triads, even major and minor ones, which are derived from the work’s determining hexachord. There can be no doubt, however, which masterwork stands before those ears, its humanism honoured and deconstructed; it is Beethoven’s Sinfonia eroica, composta per festeggiare il sovvenire d'un grand'uomo. Its tonality clearly troubled Schoenberg, and yet it clearly mattered. He responded somewhat defensively: ‘It is true that the *Ode* at the end sounds like E-flat. I don’t know why I did it. Maybe I was wrong, but at present you cannot make me feel like this.’

**‘A new style’: preparing the way for the *Eroica***

Beethoven’s so-called *Eroica* Variations make a playful, complicating backward step in Igor Levit’s programming tonight. Variation form has sometimes, erroneously considered an ugly sister amongst earlier Classical forms, as if Mozart, Haydn, and others had written nothing of worth. Nevertheless, Beethoven certainly seems to have considered his work in this genre in 1802, an F major set, op.34, immediately preceding this E-flat major work, to have offered something of a new departure. ‘‘I have made two sets of variations,’ he wrote to Breitkopf & Härtel; ‘both are written in quite a new style and each in an entirely different way … you will never regret the two works. … I myself can assure you that in both works the style is completely new for me.’ Leaving aside special pleading to a publisher, an art at which Beethoven was no amateur, the scope and scale of these works is indeed new for the composer, just as his Third, *Eroica* Symphony would mark a significant development from his first two essays in the genre.

Whereas, in the op.34 set, Beethoven had startlingly composed each variation in a different key, taking us through a pattern of falling thirds, the tonal plan of the E-flat Variations adheres to tradition, each variation written in the tonic, until a turn to the *minore*, followed by a slow, ornate *Largo* movement, prior to a brilliant, barnstorming finale. There is more than one way to be radical, though, and what could be more radical than to open with an Introduction that presents only the bass of the theme, presented in ghostly octaves, with a rudely jesting wake-up call a little after half the way through (itself following a bar’s silence)? The first three variations treat, with ever more complicated texture, with that bass – and then, at last, the theme!

Taken from his ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus*, op.43 (do not be misled by the later opus number) as well as a little Contredanse, that sixteen-bar theme proceeds to be ‘varied’, the importance, even primacy, of melody reinstated, if nevertheless far from uncontested. (How could it be, following those introductory variations?) The melody and its variations are now dependent on the bass, and perhaps *vice versa* too: a typically Beethovenian dialectic. Many typical variational devices are revisited: crossing of hands, syncopation between those hands, canonical play, introduction of triplets and other note values. Prophetically for Beethoven, the finale, now on the grandest of scales, is fugal; here the subject is not the melody but again the bass.

When Beethoven next employed this theme and bass, in his *Eroica* Symphony, it would be in a work whose political frame of reference was more overt, Bonaparte’s name furiously scribbled out upon his self-proclamation as Emperor, replaced with a generic, universal tribute to the ‘memory of a great man’. Much, although far from all, of Beethoven’s method had been outlined here.

**The People United: the musician as ‘organiser and redistributor of energies’**

Rzewski is a fine pianist in his own right; he gave, in 1962, the first performance of Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück X*, and performed works by, amongst others, Boulez, Cage, Bussotti, and Kagel. Not entirely unlike Schoenberg and Beethoven, he would turn to more overtly political writing and other activity – if again like them, far from unequivocally – in his case, in the wake of the turmoil of the late 1960s. Perhaps not entirely unlike Eisler, whose work Rzewski has also performed, he had developed a wariness of avant-gardism, concerned that it might unwittingly divorce itself from urgent political matters. These words from 1968 were to prove indicative of one important tendency within his subsequent work.

We are all ‘musicians’. We are all ‘creators’. Music is a creative process in which we can all share, and the closer we can come to each other in this process, abandoning esoteric categories and professional elitism, the closer we can all come to the ancient idea of music as a universal language … The musician takes on a new function: he is no longer the mythical star, elevated to a sham glory and authority, but rather an unseen worker, using his skill to help others less prepared than he to experience the miracle, to become great artists in a few minutes ... His role is that of organiser and redistributor of energies; he draws upon the raw human resources at hand and reshapes them ...

Whilst it is perhaps all too easy to draw a contrast between Boulezian ghosts of an imaginary ‘Darmstadt’ and such words. Rzewski’s growing interest in socialist ideas of collective improvisation, in use of popular and folk melodies, would have been anathema to many of the composers whose work he had previously, enthusiastically been performing.

Such interest may certainly be seen – and heard – in his set of thirty-six variations on a theme by Sergio Ortega: *¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!* Initially intended as an anthem for Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity coalition, it gained further revolutionary currency as a symbol of resistance both within Chile and without, following Allende’s overthrow and murder. The theme, as one might expect, is presented in forthright fashion: a focus of revolutionary inspiration, one might think. (Might we also hear a kinship with Beethoven’s bass?) Yet there is no sense of presenting music that all could play, far from it; its variations are unabashedly, heroically virtuosic. From Webern-like pointillism of the first variation, ‘Weaving, delicate but firm’ – a tribute to, or distancing from, Boulez and Stockhausen? – through something not so far from shellshock in the face of repression in the third variation, we traverse an almost incredible array of styles and procedures. We may not find them all to our taste, as they range from Rachmaninov-like grand pianism to minimalism, from Ravel back – or forward – to Webern. That, however, is surely part of the point. The people are diverse yet united: musically and politically.

Let us conclude, then, by returning to Nono, a composer who might well have appeared in a variation upon this programme – his first acknowledged work, his orchestral *Variazoni canoniche sulla serie dell’op.41 di Arnold Schönberg*, could hardly have been more explicit in its tribute – and his claim: ‘The genesis of any of my works is always to be found in a human “provocation”: an event, an experience, a test in our lives, which provokes my instinct and my consciousness, as man and musician, to bear witness.’ Such a claim is rich in possibility not only for the works heard this evening, yet equally, and in one case, still more so, for works and performances inspired by them.