

Triple Concerto by Richard Wilson

Though a Beethoven fan, I have always hated his Triple Concerto. Now having written my own, I have re-listened to his and found that it has improved considerably since my last hearing of it. All those scales and arpeggios that I used to find aimless now make a certain sense; and the anonymous harmonic changes are suddenly endearing. But there is still only one memorable theme--luckily in the last movement. The improvement in my opinion of his piece is counter-balanced by a deterioration in confidence in my own effort. Was it wise for me to replace his piano/violin/cello solo group with horn/bass-clarinet/marimba? Will those instruments spring forth like The Three Musketeers? Or resemble instead The Three Stooges. The Three Tenors? Or Three Blind Mice. The Trinity? Or The Three Bears.

I chose this combination of soloists because I thought they would blend well, because I especially admired the playing of three members of the American Symphony Orchestra specializing in these instruments, and because--to my knowledge--no composer had previously thought to feature them in combination. As a witty friend--trying to be helpful--said, "I climbed the mountain because it wasn't there." What is that supposed to mean?

Beethoven's work falls into the Sinfonia Concertante tradition. He must have loved--who doesn't--Mozart's two contributions to that genre (assuming that Mozart did write the one for winds). And prior to that there are the Brandenburg Concertos, the second of which is just about the first piece of classical music that I fell in love with. It of course features four solo

instruments--violin, flute, oboe and trumpet--representing different timbral worlds: string, wind without reed, wind with double reed, and brass. Because of its brilliant high register, the trumpet always emerges as the heroic member of that featured quartet.

One generally thinks of the concerto as a heroic genre. My soloists are not, however, heroes in the gladiator mold. I think of them rather as underprivileged but greatly accomplished individuals finally given a chance to assert themselves. Of course the horn has numerous concertos already written for it--think of Mozart and Strauss, to say nothing of Knussen and Lieberman--but it is usually treated more gingerly than I have done. In my piece, the athletic capacities of marimba and bass clarinet prod the horn into behaving more dangerously than is usual. I'd like to think that no one of my three soloists upstages the others.

Although its four movements do bear the subtitles Gatherings, Linkages, Pathways and Arrivals, my Triple Concerto is really an abstract work. There is no hidden narrative; no literary angle. Leon Botstein wanted there to be; and he has suggested to me at one time or another Frankenstein, Madame Bovary and Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*. Maybe someday...but not yet.

In the daily music reviews one reads that new music intended to assault the ears is a refreshing change from cloying efforts to please. (Not so long ago, listener-friendly music was deemed a refreshing change from the sea of impenetrable serialism.) I find that such considerations mean very little to me. I write music that I want to hear and hope to like. If I do like it, there is a chance that others with the same predisposition to Western classical music will also like it. But if those listeners happen to hate *Wozzeck*, are bored by Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Move-*

ments, and are baffled by Carter's Concerto for Orchestra, then they probably won't love my piece. I hope they will continue to attend my pre-concert talks anyway. Schoenberg once worried that his tennis partners would shun him if they ever heard his music. Suddenly, I understand his concern.

This work was commissioned jointly by The Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, with the approval of the Librarian of Congress, and The Koussevitzky Music Foundation, Inc., and by the American Symphony Orchestra. It is dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky.

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