Mystical Voices of Eastern Europe

A. Khachaturian Adagio from ballet Gayane.

Written in 1942, Khachaturian's original Gayane was the story of a young Armenian woman whose patriotic convictions conflict with her personal feelings on discovering her husband's treason. In later years the plot was modified several times, the resultant story emphasizing romance over nationalistic zeal. Adagio is a beautiful song sung by the mother to a child. It was featured prominently in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey.

H. Kulenty "Still Life with a violin"

Still life with a violin was commissioned by the National Museum in Warsaw, and was first performed by Krzysztof Bąkowski (to whom it was dedicated) at the opening of a formists' exhibition, on May 20th 1985. The composition is constructed on a succession of formal arcs which realize the transition from 'long time' (aesthetic analogy to minimal music) to 'short time' (aesthetic analogy to Anton Webern's punctualism).

-- Hanna Kulenty

L. Auerbach Tyfiflah (Prayer)

Auerbach composed this short piece, dedicated to violinist Vadim Guzman as a reaction to the tragedy of the Holocaust. The musical prayer begins with a quiet cantilena, highly reminiscent of cantorial singing in a synagogue. The melody builds in loudness and intensity, and includes a passage in double stops. A second section, faster and more folk-like, introduces a brief Jewish dance derived from a figure in the first melody, but the opening gesture of that initial melody keeps intruding. The two musical ideas alternate freely; the haunting first gesture ends the piece, fading into a quiet trill and a high harmonic note.

V. Silvestrov Postludium

"Music is still song, even if one cannot literally sing it: it is not a philosophy, not a world-view. It is, above all, a chanti, a song the world sings about itself, it is the musical testimony to life." -- Valentina Silvestrov

Out of the silence grow the first, muted sounds of Postlude for violin solo. It is a contemplative song with moments of silence, the characteristic parallelism and "Gothic" cadences recalling a canon da sonar. The melody is enlaced with mysterious, exotic sounds, then suddenly breaks off.

Valentin Silvestrov, Ukrainian composer and a pianist is perhaps best known for his post-modern musical style; some, if not most, of his works could be considered neoclassical and post-modernist. Using traditional tonal and modal techniques, Silvestrov creates a unique and delicate tapestry of dramatic and emotional textures, qualities which he suggests are otherwise sacrificed in much of contemporary music. Malcolm MacDonald perhaps put it best when he wrote that the "Russian sense of lamentation...reaches in Silvestrov's music a new expressive stage: he seems to compose, not the lament itself, but the lingering memory of it, the mood of sadness that it leaves behind."

S. Gubaidulina Dancer On A Tightrope

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. A person dancing on a tightrope is also a metaphor for this opposition: life as risk, and art as flight into another existence.

In this piece what interested me was to create the circumstances for the play of contrasts, where the precise dance rhythm of the violin overrides its inclusion in the eventful course of the piano part. For example, this is achieved by the deformation of this rhythm by playing on the strings of the piano with a glass tumbler; by the gradual transformation of these transparent harmonic sounds into aggressive fortissimo on the bass strings by the serrated bottom of the tumbler; by the menacing sound of this rhythm when it is performed by the pianist using metal thimbles and, finally – the main event in the form of the piece by the transition by the pianist from strings to keyboard.

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.

-- Sofia Gubaidulina

K. Szymanowski Notturno e Tarantella for Violin and Piano, Op. 28

Szymanowski was a key figure in Polish music in the first half of the 20th century; his sound palette is unique with an eclectic and delectable combination of exoticism, delicacy, mystery, and passion. His musical style is also infused with impressionism, expressionism, and romanticism. With violinist Paul Kochanski, he attempted to construct a new sound language, stretching the capacities of their two instruments’ sonorities. Szymanowski’s violin-piano works are indebted to this inspired partnership, which succeeded in achieving some extraordinary fantasy-filled musical effects. Often, the musical lines give the impression of soaring and spinning, of sensuality and opulence.

In light of Szymanowiski’s nationalism and his attraction to the ancient texts of Greece and the Orient, the clearly Spanish idiom of Notturno e Tarantella initially feels out of place in his oeuvre. However, he was probably influenced by the music of Manuel de Falla, to whom Kochanski had strong ties. Notturno e Tarantella begins quietly, the violin muted, with a mysterious and entranced, almost suspenseful atmosphere, evoking smokiness. Soon a Spanish rhythm overtakes the dream-like calm, giving a sparkling shine to the night. In the Tarantella that follows, the dominant characteristic is a crisp, percussive articulation and rhythm. The momentum is unstoppable and there is a fabulous evocation of the festive dances; nevertheless, a sense of elegance is never far away from the gray and brilliant mood.

-- Midori Goto

V. Barkauskas Partita for solo violin

Vytautas Barkauskas is currently regarded as one of the most notable senior Lithuanian composers, having come to prominence in the 1960s as one of the country’s most active avant-garde musicians. (At that time music in Lithuania was much invigorated by the emergence of the Polish avant-garde in the Warsaw Autumn Festivals of the late 1950s, and Barkauskas has acknowledged Witold Lutoslawski, Krzysztof Penderecki and György Ligeti as important influences.) The Partita for solo violin, Op 12 dates from 1967 and has become one of Barkauskausk’s most widely performed works. Exubrant and stylistically varied, its five short movements make use of 20th-century dance forms – rumba, blues, and beguine – in a Baroque format. The brief Preludium surprises with its wide, expressive leaps; the following Scherzo is highly rhythmic, almost obsessional. The heart of the piece is the Grave, slow movement, in which blues accents mingle with hints of the Dies Irae chant and move to a plangently emotional outcry. The ensuing Toccata is a fusillade of the characteristic repeated-note figures of its genre and flamboyant rhythmic writing, which the Partita reprises and then develops the materials of the first movement, with spooky tremolo writing and flautando harmonics.

Sergei Prokofiev: Violin Sonata no. 2 in D major, Op. 94

With memories of the great French flutist Georges Barrére in his mind from his Paris years (1922-1932), Prokofiev sketched out a sonata for flute and piano, on which he put the finishing touches upon returning to Moscow the following year. The first performance was given in December by the flutist Nikolai Charkovsky and accompanied by Sviatoslav Richter. But scarcely anyone else seemed interested in the work, so when David Oistrakh suggested that Prokofiev turn it into a violin sonata, the composer eagerly agreed. In this form, the work bears opus number 94a (or 94bis). The first performance of the Violin Sonata took place on June 17, 1944, played by Oistrakh and Lev Oborin. (Prokofiev’s other violin sonata, No. 1, was begun in 1938 but not completed until 1946, well after the "second" sonata.)

Prokofiev said he “wanted to write the sonata in a gentle, flowing classical style.” These qualities are immediately evident in the first movement, both of the principal themes are lyrical and elegant. The Scherzo, in A minor, bubbles over with witty, energetic writing in the form of flying leaps, rapid register changes and strongly marked rhythms, while the brief, expressive slow movement possesses, in critic Alan Rich’s words, “the tenderness of a Mozartian andante.” The Finale goes through several changes of mood and tempo and, in the concluding pages, it hurles along with a white-heat intensity to a thrilling close.