

About the Program

Rather than writing traditional program notes—that is, a set of notes that might give you some idea of the *who*, *what*, and *how* of what you will hear—I have decided to write a freer sort of statement, one that gives some sense of my *whys* as a composer, at least as they stand at the moment. I will refer to my three pieces on this evening’s program as examples as I consider two themes that have preoccupied me a great deal in my recent work. First, I will focus on a rather poetic topic: the part the past plays in our lives, musically and personally. Second, I will turn my attention to the notion of clarity—something that carries a bit more technical baggage.

The Past, History, Memory

If you quickly scan the titles of my pieces this evening, you’ll see a certain trend: *A Glance Back*, *A Memory*... The title *Variations for Quartet* seems blandly abstract, but it is not; both words, “variations” and “quartet,” are highly significant words in the canon, with innumerable masterpieces associated with each. So this plain title is itself a glance back, a memory.

There is nothing unique in referring to the past: indeed, the Classical tradition is so past-bound that even composers who claim to be completely “new” are usually reworking something very old indeed—whether they know it or not. (In the latter case, all one can do is repeat the famous observation that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.) The trouble, then, lies in how we become conscious of our engagement with the past; and to what degree that self-consciousness informs our music. Mere nostalgia—or, worse yet, pandering to the nostalgia of others—is artistically uninteresting to me. Music that is nostalgic is simply a glance back; my music attempts to be about the process of glancing back and the emotional nuances of that process.

Nostalgia can be a trap, as we know from the two most famous glancers-back in mythology: Lot’s wife and Orpheus. In one case, the look back leads to paralysis; nostalgia too great prevents us from moving forward. In the other case, the look back results in the *permanent loss* of the one who was sought—a more complex, ambiguous and unsettling outcome. If my piece *A Glance Back* were *merely* a glance back, it might be an artifact, an insect trapped in amber—or, worse, it might fail in invoking the past accurately and thus become a painful reminder of our state of permanent loss. This little piece does nod to earlier composers—perhaps most obviously to Schumann, Scriabin, and Berg; but the invocation of these earlier musics is not an attempt to revivify a dormant style.

The piece looks back in other ways—the early sketch of it, comprised of only the first twenty seconds or so, was from autumn of 2009, when my life was very different indeed. I completed it and incorporated it into a cycle I compiled late last year called *Mirrored Scenes* (another title laden with reference: to Ravel and Schumann). The act of finishing the piece and remembering how I felt when first setting the ideas down

three years earlier was a glancing-back—just as every performance of any piece is a glancing-back at its genesis.

There is a similar double meaning to the title *A Memory of Mélisande*. On one hand, I am looking back to Debussy's great *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and paying homage to him by writing for unaccompanied flute—for which he wrote a famous piece, *Syrinx*. On the other hand, the piece is my imagined recreation of a memory Mélisande herself is having as she's lying in her sick-bed in Act V—she remembers the moment just before her most intense encounter with Pelléas, when she was sitting combing her hair and singing to herself. She remembers phrases of her song:

MÉLISANDE at the window combing her unbound hair.

Mes longs che-veux des-cen-dent jusqu'au seuil de la tour;

MÉLISANDE

MÉLISANDE

And she remembers the feeling in the air, the gentle breeze the sparse orchestral accompaniment conveys:

ppp

The piece develops from these three fragments that, to the character Mélisande as I imagine her, denote a kind of Edenic innocence—before the affair with Pelléas and its tragic consequences.

As I've suggested already, my *Variations for Quartet* are about a different sort of memory: the Classical canon as the collective memory of our art. There are many suggestions of tradition here, starting with the shape of the piece itself: the first seven variations begin slowly and become successively brisker, a vestige of the Classical practice of diminution variations. Variations eight and nine are a slow pair; variation ten prepares us for variation eleven, which is a sort of fantastical finale. All that remains is a piano solo and a coda. This is a general form not very different from what we find in many variation sets by Mozart and Beethoven, for instance.

Paradoxically, I don't think that emphasizing the traditional elements in the *Variations for Quartet* makes the piece more approachable; if anything, it makes it seem stranger, because each of the turns just described is

reimagined in an eccentric way. It is a piece marked by eccentricity, in fact, and by irrational events that seem to have drifted in from other places. This sounds like polystylism, but it is not; it is not a patchwork, but all cut from the same cloth—the cloth is just oddly patterned.

This eccentricity may not be evident at first; the piece lasts a while, and it paces itself in getting going. And duration is the other way that memory is manifest in this piece: it's long enough that it has its own memory. This is not a new idea, either: the *da capo* at the end of the *Goldberg Variations* is surely a gesture of memory; so is the poignant return of the opening song in Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben*. In a more general sense, musical form itself is a function of memory, for experiencing form in real-time depends upon memory.

Clarity

Clarity is not the same as simplicity; clear music may be complex. On the other hand, unclear music may be, and frequently is, simple—or, in the worst cases, simple-minded. My music used to be a great deal more opaque; a good example is a piece I wrote a few years ago called *Forking Paths*. I cite this piece because I went through a change after writing it; I was, and still am, quite pleased with the piece, but I decided I didn't want to continue writing music so overburdened with detail, much of it inaudible. I wanted to strip the surface of my music of its frills and trills. The time I've spent with Classical literature has taught me that the smallest details can have the greatest expressive importance; I want my music to have that power, too, and much of my recent work, including the three pieces on tonight's program, attempts to invest details with significance. This requires clarity, because details only have meaning when their context is clear.

“Context,” as I just used it, can mean many different things. One type of context is textural: an unclear texture might be overloaded, heavy, dense, thick with simultaneities. In my recent zeal for the opposite—lightness, space, and openness—I may verge on the austere occasionally; passages in the *Variations* especially may strike some listeners as somewhat bare. Nor is much polyphony in evidence in my music on this evening's program; harmonic voice-leading will always be an obsession of mine, but in these pieces I forgo other types of more ostentatious counterpoint—this is certainly not *Variations and Fugue!*

Another sort of context is linear: clarity of structure, in other words, both on a large scale and on a phrasal level. This is music that is parsed into sections, which in turn are parsed into phrases; and all of these parsings are punctuated.

The final type of context I will consider here relates to the language of the music itself. If we take language as a metaphor, an overloaded textural context might be too many people speaking at once; a confusing linear context would be one in which words are not strung together cogently; and this last type of context would go awry if you tried to address, say, an English-speaking audience in German. If you go to new music concerts, you know the feeling of trying to find the context in which a composer fits; you listen for aural signals so that you can nod and say: “Oh, she's *that* kind of composer.” These signals are of all sorts and sizes, and every listener is waiting for signals to tell him just “what kind of piece” he is

hearing. No language is universal—in other words, no musical rhetoric is inherently intelligible by all. What can “clarity” mean in this context?

I’d have to be very clever indeed to have a good answer to *that* question. The world offers a bewildering variety of musical contexts, which leads to a Babel-like situation—no listener can specialize in every -ism out there, and the intricacy of some of the dominant -isms is such that one has to be an expert listener to understand the particularities of a piece in one of those styles. Signing on to an -ism is a facile solution; but a composer who does so is at least guaranteed some specialized audience, however small, to appreciate his work.

Rather than focusing on my place in this inhospitable landscape, I’ve focused on making my pieces accessible via their internal logic; in other words, you learn *how* to listen to my pieces as you’re listening to them. Many of my pieces start by establishing a language. The best example on tonight’s program is the first part of the *Variations*, which is very “plain” indeed—akin to the plainness of a Bach pattern prelude, which establishes a “key” for what follows. (This is a purely utilitarian account of Bach’s pattern preludes, and is not meant to downplay their beauty, subtlety, and nuance.) This opening sets harmonic norms for the *Variations*; and a great source of expression in many musics is deviation from norms. We know this well: in a diatonic melody, a chromatic tone will stand out as expressively poignant; or, in a melody that mostly moves by steps and thirds, a large interval—a sixth, say—will be an expressive peak. But there have to be norms in the first place in order for deviations to be meaningful. For there to be foreground, there must be a background; otherwise there is no depth.

The establishing of norms is a long process in the *Variations*, because it is a long piece and there is much groundwork to be laid; it is a less involved process in *Mélisande* and *A Glance Back*. But it is a process that takes space. My music deliberately invokes space and openness, not only to give time for the listener to grasp the language, but as an antidote to the lack of space and openness in our lives. We walk increasingly narrow paths, with devices encroaching on our attention and energy at every turn; one of the chief beauties of the concert hall is that it is an oasis from noise and distraction. While in a concert, we are ourselves in relationship to just one object, the music itself; and we get to share that experience with others. We all know the feeling: after a day spent rushing around attending to business, we breathlessly stumble into the concert hall, settle into our seat... and sigh with relief, knowing that we will be still and quiet for a while now, attentive not to a dozen things at once but to just one thing. I regard the creation of music for such a setting as a sacred enterprise; and the last thing I want my music to be is more chaos and noise that heightens the stress and strain of its listeners.

— Daniel Pesca