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EPIPHANY AND EPIPHANIES OF THE MANDOLIN

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*The serenader
And the beautiful listeners
Exchange idle comments
Under the singing branches,
It is Tircis and Aminta,
And the eternal Clitander,
It is also Damis,
who fashions tender couplets for cruel maidens,
Their short jackets of silk,
Their long-trained robes,
Their elegance, their laughter,
Their blue-soft shadows,
Moving in the ecstasy of a rose-gray moon,
And the mandolin chatters
With the movements of the breeze.
La, la, la, la...*

Paul Verlaine

The mandolin has had an interesting, though perhaps curious, history as a performing instrument. Related to the lute in structure, the mandolin is usually thought of as a folk instrument, capable of only a limited range and dynamic level. This conception of the instrument has changed dramatically in the last few years as the result of commissions of new music for the mandolin by Dimitris Marinos, the gifted Greek-American virtuoso. It is the purpose of this article to discuss *Epiphany*, a work for the unique combination of Amplified Violin, Mandolin, and Tape by C.P. First. This work was premiered at the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago on March 16, 1995 and was written for the Lithuanian violin virtuoso Raimundas Katilius and Dimitris Marinos. The extraordinary demands of *Epiphany* and its unusual combination of live and taped parts require an historical context for their proper understanding.

A Brief Overview of Previous Usage of the Mandolin

According to the article on the mandolin in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, the first repertory appears in the early 18th century. The *Sonate al mandolino solo* by Francesco Contini is cited, as well as a number of solo and ensemble pieces written by Italian mandolin virtuosos who worked in Vienna or Paris. The mandolin was occasionally used in operas, where its "serenade" connotations were employed by composers for special effects. It appears, for example, in Antonio Maria Bononcini's *La conquista delle Spagne di Scipione Africano il giovane* (1707). But its best-known appearances occur in Handel's *Alexander Balus* (1748) and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787), where it is featured in the celebrated serenade. Handel uses the mandolin with the harp in *Alexander Balus* in an exotic aria for Cleopatra, thus creating an unusual color to imply Egypt. The mandolin continues to be used by opera composers of the 19th century - Verdi, for instance, employing the instrument in both *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893).

By the 18th century the mandolin is featured in a number of concertos which use the standard three-movement format of fast-slow-fast. Vivaldi's concerto RV 532 and 425, for example, combine the instrument with the harpsichord, while RV 558

employs two mandolins, two theorbos, two violins, and continue. A number of lesser-known composers of the time, such as Emanuele Barbella (1718-77) and Carlo Cecere (1706-61) write solo mandolin concert! in which the native lightness of the instrument is emphasized.

At the beginning of the 19th century the mandolin had quite a vogue among Viennese composers — Hummel wrote a concerto for it. Even Beethoven composed an Adagio in Eb major (WoO 43 No. 2) and two sonatinas: in C major (WoO 44 No. 1) and C minor (WoO 43 No. 1) for solo mandolin. Composers of the generation of von Weber and Schubert also used the mandolin as an accompanying instrument for songs. Clearly, by this time a rather large number of solo works and concert! had been written for the mandolin, which, however, employ standard figurations and do little to expand the technical horizons of the instrument.

The instrument again is found in the early 20th century in a number of works of the Viennese school. Mahler employs it in the Symphonies 7 and 8 and *DOS Lied von der Erde*, while Schoenberg includes it in the Variations for Orchestra. Weber gives it prominence in the Op. 10 pieces for orchestra, and Stravinsky, perhaps influenced by these examples, employs it in his late ballet *Agon*, where it complements the pointillistic texture of the other instruments.

The mandolin is used by composers of the earlier 20th century to provide exotic color and, in the case of *Das Lied*, to suggest a Chinese instrument. Thus its earlier connotations as a principally serenade instrument are expanded, but none of these composers writes solo works or requires new technical patterns.

In order for composers to do so, a number of presuppositions regarding the nature of the instrument had to be examined. Can the dynamic and expressive range of the instrument be enlarged? Can it produce sonorities that compete with or complement other instruments, including electronic? Can new playing techniques be devised which increase its virtuosic capabilities?

During the 1980s the Greek mandolin virtuoso Dimitris Marines began commissioning contemporary composers to write works for the mandolin which demand new capabilities of dynamics, tone color, and emotional nuance. Among the composers he commissioned was C.P. First, who has a doctorate in composition from Northwestern University. C.P. First has won awards from the International Society for Contemporary Music, ASCAP, and the National Association of Composers, to name a few. First has thus far written two works for mandolin: *Tantrum* (1992) and *Epiphany* (1994). In the words of the composer:

Epiphany, for amplified mandolin, violin, and two-channel tape, is the second in a series of three works for mandolin commissioned by Dimitris Marines and Raimundas Katilius for a performance at the 4th Baltic Festival *Gaida* in Vilnius, Lithuania. This work, like its companion *Tantrum*, explores psychological and emotional states. While *Tantrum* exploits the explosive attributes of the performer's musical and technical persona, *Epiphany* plays upon the often mystical qualities that characterize the artistry of these great performers.

The discussion of Epiphany

Epiphany is an appropriate title in that the composition is indeed a demonstration or showing forth (the original meaning of the word) of the pyrotechnical abilities of the performers for whom the work was written. The work is dedicated to Dr. Dalia Kučėnas, who was instrumental in introducing First and Marines to Katilius and in arranging for their visit to Lithuania. The dedication reads:

Epiphany is dedicated to Dalia Kučėnas whose unending devotion to humanity and art has united two nations in music and friendship. With all my respect and love, Dalia, I give to you this music.

Epiphany is best understood in the context of the work which precedes it: *Tantrum* for mandolin and tape which explores the outer limits of the instrument. As the title implies, the work is a frenzied study which moves into the dynamic level of the instrument. The composer writes:

In 1989,¹ attended a concert of new music that included a performance by Dimitris Marines. His uncanny ability to illuminate a work's musical structure and aesthetic meaning inspired the composition of *Tantrum*. His virtuosity, as well as the mandolin's unusual timbre capabilities dictated the sonic materials of the work. Various mandolin sounds were recorded to provide the source materials for the tape. These recordings then were transformed into the state in which they appear on the tape using only two tape recorders and a Mirage sampler. Thus the tape is constructed exclusively from pre-recorded mandolin sounds.

The requirements for the mandolin include incessant 32nd note rhythm and relentless tremolo articulation in order to exploit Marino's virtuosity. These attributes not only impose strenuous physical demands on the performer but also assist in creating the turbulent nature of the composition.

Tantrum is clearly based on sonorous derivations from the opening idea to create an almost orchestral texture for the mandolin and the tape. This work demonstrates that the mandolin can successfully be used with electronic media and proves that it has the potential for expanded sonorities.

Both *Tantrum* and *Epiphany* use the historical-technical tradition associated with the mandolin during the 18th and 19th centuries as the platform for an extended practice, what the composer calls "metapraxis." This is to say that such conventional technical patterns as the tremolo are found in both scores, but lead to novel extensions and transformations. At key points the figurations and even the texture return to what is close to normal practice, but these retrospections are heard in a different way because of the intervening expansions. Thus both works demand of their listeners an awareness of the connotations of historical mandolin practice in order to appreciate the resultant metapraxis.

Epiphany is a complementary work to *Tantrum*. It is more lyric and includes an extremely demanding part for the violin, creating problems of ensemble and balance. Since the tape is fully notated in the score, the composition becomes a trio for three equally important parts. The part for two-channel tape is constructed entirely from mandolin and violin recordings that were processed using an Emulator sampler.

The general impression the work gives is that of a movement from lyric statements with sustained pitches to sections in which the parts move rapidly and employ atonal disjunct patterns. Often the performers are asked to perform complex arpeggio figurations in intricate cross rhythms. The violin is required to play pizzicati at high speed, while the mandolin, in a reversal of roles, is given multiple stops and quick figurations similar to those in the violin. Although the texture is intensely contrapuntal, points in the score occur during which one line is sustained while the other parts continue their frenzied activity. These episodes offer the listener a chance to orient himself in the general density of texture.

According to the composer, timbre and technique are the most significant factors in the creation of the large-scale form. Since rhythmic and thematic development in the conventional sense are not emphasized, timbre and virtuosity are the compositional factors which principally affect the listener. The listener's attention is drawn towards the varied colors of the individual instrumental patterns as well as the changing relationships among the violin, mandolin, and tape.

Yet each section of the work grows out of material from the previous. Thus one has a number of explicit realizations of motives presented covertly in the previous section. *Epiphany* thus becomes a series of disclosures (again the original sense of the word comes to mind) leading to a conclusion that clarifies the opening gesture. (See musical examples 1 and 2) *Epiphany's* micro-structure is controlled by chromatic cells or motives which give it subtle cohesion. In a letter to the author, the composer described the role pitch has in *Epiphany*:

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

The pitch structure in the piece is largely governed by chromatic sets. The pitch collections, therefore, are analogous to the designs found in *Tantrum*, the companion to *Epiphany*. The static pitch content is often interrupted by a lyrical motive that recurs throughout. This balancing of the static with the lyrical becomes the principal way of contrasting the primary and secondary levels of structure.

It is therefore clear that *Epiphany* employs a sophisticated system of internal references as well as allusions to the companion *Epiphany*. It is also a testing of limits of ensemble, performing techniques, and complex rhythms. (See the following musical example).

Ex. 3

But *Epiphany* is more than a study in complexity for its own sake, it is a moving and aesthetically satisfying experience. In the words of the composer (quoted from the letter noted above), *Epiphany* is part of a cycle whose final work has yet to be written:

I anticipate a third work that will create a kind of three-movement trilogy with *Tantrum* and *Epiphany*. This work will employ a third instrument in addition to the mandolin, violin, and tape. The three works, then, will form a cycle, although I would like them to be performed successively but not adjacently.

Without question, this concluding work of the trilogy will be written with Katilius and Marines in mind. I look forward to it with great anticipation, knowing that it too will be an epiphany, a disclosure of secrets found in *Tantrum* and *Epiphany*.

Reference:

Richard Campbell, "Mandolin," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), v. 11, pp. 606-09.