

it is expressed through the materials of their medium, sound and silence, over the literary or philosophical interpretation of those sounds.

Ben Harper

10.1017/S0040298217001358

FRANCO DONATONI: Chamber Works. Ensemble Adapter. Kairos 0015021KAI

Composer Franco Donatoni was something of an enigmatic figure among post-war Italian modernists, and his work has remained somewhat marginalized as a result. In an interview with Andrew Ford (published in the book *Composer to Composer*), Donatoni maintained that he had experienced ‘several crises’ during his career. These challenges were heightened by major bouts with mental illness. Several curtailments and cessations altogether of musical activity occurred at various points in his lifetime. These were demoralizing to be sure, but his steadfast determination to conquer each successive experience of creative block resulted in re-emergence full of vitality, with compositions that explored new directions. Ford later remarked (in his other seminal work, *Illegal Harmonies*) that in the twentieth century, Donatoni and Stockhausen were the two composers who most frequently changed direction in their work. Indeed, Donatoni frequently identified with Stockhausen’s concept of ‘moment form’, crafting music full of wit and surprises.

It is precisely these traits – inscrutability, creative vitality, mercurial changeability and indomitability – that that have attracted Ensemble Adapter, a Berlin-based new music group, to adopt the further promulgation of Donatoni’s music as a long term project: they plan to record several compact discs of the composer’s music. The first recording was released this past September on the Kairos imprint. It contains two sets of pieces that, while created separately, ultimately accumulated into cycles of work.

Donatoni often remarked that he didn’t imagine his pieces in advance, but instead worked through them to come up with each successive composition’s material. Essentials were preferred to a wide swath of reference points, with winnowing down to the bare minimum necessary to create a work being a preferred technique. For instance, in several of the pieces on the Kairos CD, Donatoni begins with a cell of just three pitches, very gradually expanding the harmonic field through the use of permutation (transposition, inversion, etc.)

of the original cell and the interpolation of intuitively derived additional material. Another approach frequently found in Donatoni’s music is his reworking of pieces into new contexts. Thus, a pair each of solos for harp (*Marches*, 1979), piccolo (*Nidi*, 1979), and clarinet (*Clair*, 1980), are chopped up and reframed as the trio *Small* (1981).

The composer had a penchant for piccolo, and both movements of *Nidi* are impressive displays of virtuosity on the instrument. Donatoni suggested birdsong as the inspiration for the piece, saying, ‘It sounds like a little bird making her nest’. The nest, built out of strands of those three-note pitch cells, is followed by sounds that much more resemble a bird aloft in flight than carefully building a domicile. Kristjana Helgadóttir, bearing in mind Donatoni’s extra-musical inspiration, moulds phrases carefully, allows runs to flow ebulliently, and keeps the stridency of the piccolo’s upper register to a minimum. Harpist Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir is given a difficult task, making fast arpeggiated music ‘march’. However, the incisive attacks she employs manage to give heft and metric stress that supplies the requisite martial illusion. To provide a third layer of gestural types, *Clair* includes klezmer-style riffs, dynamic shifts, and widened vibrato, performed with characterful zest by clarinetist Ingólfur Vilhjálmsón. The three musicians together interpret *Small*, a recombination of solo elements into an ensemble piece. Somewhat surprisingly, the disparate characters of each instrumental part often collide and commingle in unexpectedly organic fashion. This is no cut-and-paste piece, but instead a very effective recomposition of preexisting material into an altogether convincing new incarnation. The piece’s climax, a pile-up of the trio’s most emphatic gestures into a dense polyphony, is particularly stirring. What’s more, one would be hard-pressed to describe it as sounding like nearly anyone else: this is Donatoni at his most original.

A similar process is undertaken in Donatoni’s earlier *Estratto* triptych. *Estratto* (1969), a brief work based on a motoric ostinato of dissonant lines in equal note values, is played with scrupulous rhythmic integrity by pianist Elmar Schrammel. *Secondo Estratto* (1970) explores the same percussive texture, but here Schrammel is joined by harpsichordist Peterri Pitko and mandolinist Seth Josel. This version is significantly extended to ten-and-a-half minutes in duration. The trio overlaps the material culled from the original *Estratto* in an elaborate game of musical tag.

In *Quarto Estratto* (1974) Donatoni makes two interesting moves, increasing the ensemble size to a septet, including piccolo and violin, and once again distilling the material to its essence, bringing the duration back down to a little less than three minutes. This is the first recording of the piece, and the ensemble mentions in the liner notes that they had a difficult choice to make. The parts have no bar lines or metric symbols; the only indication is 'play as fast as possible'. Donatoni didn't indicate whether that meant strict coordination of the parts, playing fast as possible throughout, or instead to allow for a certain measure of independence, of quasi-aleatory. Adapter, mindful that their rendition will be a benchmark of sorts, considered both approaches, but ended up opting for more independence between parts. Observing the snippet of score that is included in the liner notes, this appears to be both a pragmatic and logical decision based on the information that is shared. The resulting music is a dizzying shimmer. Even amid the hurly burly of the instruments' individual sprints, the limited pitch material in each part allows for a sense of harmonic coordination. Each of *Quattro's* iterations takes on a different character. It is to Donatoni's credit that it is hard to pick a favourite among them.

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10.1017/S004029821700136X

LONGLEASH: *Passage* (Trapani, Iannotta, Watanabe, Filidei). New Focus Recordings fcr180

Despite public and governmental hostility toward the avant-garde in the McCarthy era, the American Central Intelligence Agency was willing to try anything in its propaganda war with the Soviet Union. This included sponsoring the Congress for Cultural Freedom to use American literature, painting, poetry and music to demonstrate the USA's creative, intellectual and cultural superiority, and to subvert the rigid Soviet system's censorship and control. The CIA saw Abstract Expressionism as an opportunity, and acted as covert patron to painters such as Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and others, many of whom were ex-communists. For security reasons, and to preserve the integrity of the programme, there had to be enough distance between the agency and the artists, who had little respect for the government, and no knowledge of their role in Operation Long Leash. In its heyday, the Congress for Cultural Freedom ran two dozen

magazines, had offices in 35 countries, and funded touring exhibitions of American painting that visited every large European City.

Jump ahead more than 60 years, and the ideological wrangling persists, albeit using different tools and provocations. In 2015, American investment in the National Endowment for the Arts budget was \$146 million, while the 2017 annual cost of security for the current President is budgeted at \$120 million. Today's CIA, with a 2013 fiscal budget of \$14.7 billion, uses the *Barney and Friends* theme, the *Meow Mix* commercial and Metallica in its 'psychological operations', while classical music is functionally relegated to dispersing loitering teens outside 7–11s. The American string trio, Longleash, however, took the recently declassified fab name from the CIA's project, cast away the agency's aspersions, and embarked on the more noble venture of fostering new music for violin, cello and piano.

All of the pieces on the *Passage* recording exhibit traits of the title, in the transit from one condition or process to another, in dislocated segments, via the wandering lapse of time, or more generally in the ongoing redefinition of the string trio. *Passing Through* is Christopher Trapani's peripatetic beeline through a long path of chords guided by computer-assisted voice-leading procedures. While the piano performs its tetrachordal manoeuvres on a bristling rhythmic surface, the strings exchange dynamic sliding and bolting patterns overtop. By contrast, the related second section, *Staying Put*, is a more focused exercise in ensemble virtuosity. While more stable harmonically, it is equally accomplished in its compositional technique. Juan de Dios Magdaleno's *Strange Attractor* articulates its fractally generated characters using extremes of register in the piano part, with the strings frequently pulling resonances from its harmonic vocabulary. With its strident, scattered, yet related piano gestures, the piece is somehow simultaneously inevitable and chaotic in its fragmentary behaviours. All things considered, more than a handful of other pieces share the same title and fractal apparatus as Magdaleno's, and it's not apparent what unique contribution this adds to the batch.

ver_flies_sen, by Yukiko Watanabe, features exquisitely orchestrated plays of timbre blurring into one another. The piece projects both segmentation and liquidity, with sonic distortions akin to the visual morphing of tiles in a pool as seen through the rippling water in Adriana Varejão's *O Hungaro*, the painting that inspired the piece. Longleash's interpretation subtly navigates the balance between the feel of Varejão's painting, and the passing, elapsing, and