

About as long as forever is

as long as forever is, a cycle of five songs completed in 2003 for two voices and five Renaissance-period instruments from poems by Dylan Thomas, marks a return to diatonic music and follows a similar trajectory to a series of earlier vocal cycles devoted to great 20th century poets: *if by yes* (e.e. cummings, 1994); *The Other Side of the Window* (Margaret Atwood, 1995); *Walking Naked* (William Butler Yeats, 1996); and *The Impatient Explorer* (Kenneth Patchen, 1997). That series, which began a decade ago, was, in turn, a return to the compositional architecture of three earlier works all based on the poetry of Richard Brautigan: *The Return of the Rivers* (1985), *Two Transfers* (1985) and *Pity the Morning Light that Refuses to Wait for Dawn* (1986).

The guiding principle in each of these compositions has been the words of the texts themselves. As a result, the Brautigan music is deceptively naïve in the same ways that Brautigan's poems are. Similarly, the cummings music is frequently playful while the Atwood music contrasts extreme beauty with macabre elements. The Yeats music is very lush and sentimental but also a tad morbid, and the Patchen music is simultaneously direct and surreal.

Following the completion of the performance oratorio *MACHUNAS*, created in collaboration with Lucio Pozzi, I was principally concerned with instrumental music. Whereas the words were the sole arbiter of form in my earlier music, the words for *MACHUNAS* unleashed a flood of structural implications (from a new approach to composing serially—which doesn't sound like serialism—to musical lipograms [pitch avoidance]). While the compositional devices used for *Machunas* were implicit from the narrative and grew directly from it, they became aesthetic ends in themselves and inspired further structural conceits that seemed to leave the voice behind. Thus, *Brinson's Race* for trumpet and string quartet (2001), a composition exploring the possibilities of being in all keys, no key and one key, and all meters, no meter and one meter. Then *is 5* for solo harpsichord (2002), whose every five-beat measure contains only five pitches which keep shifting, creating a poly-pentatonicism from a 12-tone pitch gamut. And most recently, *circles mostly in wood* for wind quintet in quarter tones (2002), a composition derived from a single six-note sequence (or hexachord as the serialists would say) that is treated tonally.

The music for *as long as forever is* continues the formal experimentation of my post-*MACHUNAS* music while at the same time preserving the textual clarity of the earlier poetry cycles. But, since *as long as forever is* has a completely diatonic pitch palette, it is harmonically light years away from the full chromaticism and subsequent full quarter-tonal ultrachromaticism of its most recent predecessors. However, many of the same musical gambits of the recent instrumental pieces appear here as well, though admittedly in a slightly less transparent way. (e.g. All possible descending pentatonic subsets of the Lydian scale are presented sequentially in "Here"—an idea not unlike the cascade of all the possible permutations of the *circles mostly in wood* hexachord in that composition's final movement—but the sequence now functions as a countermelody in an instrumental voice rather than the main musical idea.)

The poems of Dylan Thomas are simultaneous very old fashioned and very highly structured, featuring seemingly endless phrases crammed full of internal parallelisms. They seem to come from a simpler, earlier time, yet feel strangely out of place in that simpler, earlier time. So they demanded a musical setting which was simultaneous old fashioned and completely unfamiliar. Hence, diatonic scales ascend and descend (very old fashioned) within metrical cycles of 17, 18, or 19, or a composite meter (unfamiliar). Each movement is fashioned on a different medieval mode, all beginning on the note 'd' for biographical reasons. "Process" is in the Mixolydian mode (a major scale with a flat 7th); "Here" is Lydian (a major scale with a sharp 4th). "Time" is Phrygian (a natural minor scale with a flat 2nd). "Still" is Dorian (a natural minor scale with a sharp 6th). Finally, "The Natural Doorway" begins in the Aeolian (natural minor) and ends in the Ionian (major), alternating between relative majors and minors throughout. The simplicity of the melodic/harmonic language will hopefully allow listeners to concentrate on the more complex metrical procedures and, more importantly, on the words of Dylan Thomas, which triggered this music.

Urban legend has it that on the night of November 4, 1953, exactly 50 years before I completed this music, Dylan Thomas walked into the White Horse Tavern in New York's Greenwich Village at around 2 A.M. Depending on whose account, he either ordered 17, 18, or 19 Irish whiskeys, claiming it to be the record. It was his final public appearance. The 1880 Saloon, which still stands, has a room dedicated to his memory where I sometimes drink a few Irish whiskeys in his honor (never double digits!).

The ambiguous quantity of Dylan Thomas's alcohol consumption on that fateful night is a compositional device in *as long as forever is*. "Here" contains 19 beats per measure. "Time" has 18, and "Still" has 17. "Process" overlaps rhythmic cycles of 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 beats, creating a completely ambiguous sense of time, while the juxtaposition of 4 and 5 beat cycles in "The Natural Doorway" ultimately yields a cycle of 20, the whiskey that Dylan Thomas definitely never drank.

At the time I started composing *as long as forever is*, I was reading a biography of Noah Greenberg, founder of the New York Pro Musica, who essentially launched the Medieval and Renaissance music movement in America. It turns out that Greenberg was a drinking buddy of Dylan Thomas's at the White Horse. It also turns out that Greenberg had a side job at the time as Elliott Carter's copyist for the First String Quartet, one of the most rhythmically complex pieces of chamber music composed up to that time. I had already begun imagining Thomas's poems through a sonic landscape of recorders, crumhorn, violone and bells, each independently tracing different rhythmic cycles. Everything is ultimately related to everything else.

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