

BRINSON'S RACE - A Personal Note

Brinson's Race is for Robert Lane Overstreet (1930-2005), who was known to his many students and friends as "Doc." From the time of his retirement until the end of his life, he lived in a house that he built on Brinson's Race, the farmland of his ancestors in Emanuel County, one of the only counties in the state of Georgia that voted against secession in the 1860s. *Brinson's Race* is about him and about that land.

I visited Brinson's Race for the first time in the summer of 1996 which is where I first met Doc. Since that initial meeting, I returned to visit him there three more times: in the autumn of 1998, the winter of 1999-2000 (I greeted the millennium from Brinson's Race), and the spring of 2001 for the premiere of this piece of music which he commissioned. The extraordinary fact that I have been at Brinson's Race for all four seasons in order was not premeditated, but is indicative of the magic of Doc and that land. I hope that *Brinson's Race* conveys some of this magic.

Outside Doc's home, there was a huge cotton field. During one of my visits, I walked around the perimeter of this field. Walking casually, it seemed to look the same from every vantage point. On closer inspection, however, details kept shifting. This is what I wanted to convey in the first movement, "Great Circle," which is a palindrome. A casual hearing yields a propulsive, minimalist-sounding high-energy romp with occasional bursts of melody. Closer listening reveals an elaborate web of four simultaneous rhythms (2, 3, 4 and 6) presented in an ever-shifting harmonic rhythm inspired by a variety of patterns including the word-ending scheme of the sestina, a Provençal poetic form, and serialism (both in terms of using a 12-tone pitch row and serialized durations) albeit in a way that sounds nothing like serial music. The movement is firmly in the key of D, with the two hexachords of the 12-tone row acting as two distinct harmonic progressions that modulate into and out of each other. The name "Great Circle" is also the name of a wonderful novel by Conrad Aiken that was the first piece of American fiction to explore the dream-narrative implications of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Aiken is one of Doc's favorite authors. Talking with Doc about Aiken and *Great Circle* the first time we met solidified our friendship.

There is a graveyard near Brinson's Race in which the ancestors of the Brinson and Overstreet families are buried. The graves are surrounded by a fence. Outside the fence, there are several additional tombstones, only one of which is marked. It is the grave of Pharabe Chance, the African-American mistress of one of Doc's ancestors. The descendents of their union are Doc's closest neighbors. I was struck by how she was part of the space yet outside of it and wanted to convey this in the music. "Fair Be Chance," the second movement aleatory procedure named in her memory, is the most mysterious and least immediate part of *Brinson's Race*. It is in no key ("0") and has no rhythm.

The final movement, "The Music of Time," hopefully rewards the patient listeners and performers after the journeys of the mind and soul in "Great Circle" and "Fair Be Chance." It is a set of variations that is firmly in the key of C and firmly in triple meter throughout. The theme is presented in a variety of settings reflecting the passage of time and the people who lived on Brinson's Race from the era of Native Americans, to the earliest settlers (both European and African), to more recent immigrants, to the present day. It is named after *A Dance to the Music of Time*, the 12-novel cycle by Anthony Powell, which is organized into groups of three novels for each season. Doc had just finished reading it the last time I visited him and I hope to read it one day. The three movements can be perceived as the mind, the spirit and the body of Brinson's Race. They also spell out D-O-C, as they should.

Robert Overstreet, along with Louise H. Abbot and Jean A. Morgan, arranged the world premiere performance of *Brinson's Race* which took place at the Twin City United Methodist Church in Twin City, Georgia (Emanuel County) on May 13, 2001 in a performance by trumpeter James McBride and the Magellan String Quartet. The same forces performed the work again at the same location, at the request of Robert Overstreet in the last year of his life, on May 15, 2005. On August 26, 2010, *Brinson's Race* received its New York City premiere in a performance by the Locrian Chamber Players at Riverside Church.

—Frank J. Oteri