

Writing for a stringed instrument and a piano is, as any classically trained composer will tell you, a risky business. On paper, they have little to do with each other at all: the stringed instruments of Western art music, with the exception of harp and guitar, are usually bowed, while the piano is, strictly speaking, a percussion instrument (though more on that later); and in terms of tuning, string players hear pitch quite differently, making minute microtonal adjustments without thinking (try this: take a violin or a viola – Charlotte Hug's instruments of choice – and pitch a major sixth double stop with the open G and the E on the D string above, and then, when it sounds "right", keep that E exactly where it is and play it with the open A string above: your perfect fourth won't sound perfect at all). On the other hand, once a piano has been tuned correctly – and that's not as easy as it sounds, but here is not the place for temperamental discussions – there's not much you can do in the way of microtonal shading unless you delve inside the instrument and attack the strings directly (more on that later, too).

Maybe it's because it's such a challenge to marry the timbres and techniques of such radically different instruments that composers have been attracted to the idea for well over two centuries now, not that many of them ever felt it necessary to comment on the difficulties involved until Stravinsky, who noted how incompatible the violin and piano were before going on to write one of the 20th century's great works for them, 1932's *Duo Concertant*. But just eight years later, John Cage, writing for dancer Sybilla Fort, came up with the idea of the prepared piano (a percussion ensemble was not available, so you might say he *improvised*), and the tradition of instrumental *détournement* that began with Henry Cowell's *Aeolian Harp* has continued to the present day, from Keith Rowe laying his guitar flat to Seymour Wright dismantling his alto saxophone altogether.

Swiss violist Charlotte Hug and French pianist Frédéric Blondy, being acutely aware of the history and repertoire – both composed and improvised – of their respective instruments, well understand that once one goes beyond the traditional boundaries of "normal" technique, the question of compatibility is of little or no importance. There are moments on *Bouquet* where I really don't know who's doing what, and it hardly matters. From a purely technical standpoint, the instrumental innovations are numerous – from the steely drones Blondy summons forth from his piano by bowing its strings (who said it was a percussion instrument?) and the eerie glissandi he produces with rosined chopsticks (who said there wasn't much the piano could do in the way of microtonal shading?) to Hug's "soft bow" technique, which allows her to play all four strings of her viola simultaneously – but what impresses most about these twelve pieces is their sheer musicality: *how* the sounds are produced, intriguing though that may be, is of far less importance than *what* they do and how they're combined to produce music of formal rigour and extraordinary emotional power.

Half a dozen clicks on a mouse will summon up all the biographical information you're ever likely to need on our protagonists, not to mention several splendid videos of them in action, but it's worth pointing out that as performers and teachers they both have wide experience of contemporary classical music (an odd *appellation contrôlée*, that, as the music in question neither corresponds to the definition of "classical" as proposed by Charles Rosen in *The Classical Style*, nor is hardly "contemporary" anymore, since a lot of the stuff I see in contemporary classical bins was written over half a century ago). I haven't had the pleasure of perusing Charlotte's record collection, but I can tell you that there's as much Lachenmann and Ligeti in Fred's as there is free jazz (though Cecil Taylor's *Student Studies* is a favourite, and you might just hear distant echoes of CT's extreme register contrary motion in "Minnehaha"), and I suspect *Bouquet* is more likely to appeal to connoisseurs of Grisey, Xenakis, Cage and Feldman than to listeners weaned on Coltrane, Sanders and Ayler.

So the line "all music *composed* and performed by" (my italics) is significant in my mind, especially since in recent years I've had to revise my own preconceptions about what does or does not constitute composition. I used to think there had to be something on paper, but I'm not so sure any more. Even assuming you could transcribe this music accurately and end up with a more or less traditionally notated score, any detailed analysis you then went on to make using standard new music set theory tools would only end up telling you what you can already hear: that this is top-notch music made by two outstanding performers with exceptional ears for pitch, rhythm, timbre and structure at the micro and macro level.

Dan Warburton 2011

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