SOMETHING IN BETWEEN CHARLIE MINGUS AND CHARLIE KAUFMAN

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Music in
Composition

By
Felipe Lovaglio Rossi

May 2013
The Graduate Project of Felipe Rossi is approved:

_________________________________________                                                    ___________
Martin Jaroszewicz                                                                Date

_______________________________________                                                    ___________
Alexandra Monchick, Ph.D.                                                             Date

_________________________________________                                                    ___________
Liviu Marinescu, DMA, Chair                                                          Date

California State University, Northridge
This project, along with the rest of my work as a student at California State University, Northridge, is dedicated to Katrina Elder.

“Art is never finished, only abandoned.” - Leonardo da Vinci

“Another way of approaching the thing is to consider it unnamed, unnameable.” - Francis Ponge
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature page ..............................................................................................................ii
Dedication ..................................................................................................................iii
Abstract ....................................................................................................................v

*Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman*

Some considerations about my general compositional approach ................................1
Some considerations about the piece itself ..................................................................1
A brief formal analysis of the piece ..........................................................................4
Conclusions ..............................................................................................................6
References ................................................................................................................8
Appendix ...................................................................................................................9
ABSTRACT

SOMETHING IN BETWEEN CHARLIE MINGUS AND CHARLIE KAUFMAN

by

Felipe Lovaglio Rossi

Master of Music in Composition

*Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman* is an eight-minute music composition for chamber orchestra. It was conceived from my personal interest in creating a sound narrative that could generate different atmospheres, colors, contrasts, agreements, tensions, and resolutions. György Ligeti’s Piano and Violin Concerti had a major influence over the piece regarding pitch, mood and form organization. I adapted his technique of interval signal to differentiate the sections of the work as well as to establish some chromatic balance – the alternation of diatonic pitch sets related chromatically. I also had strong musical influences from Gustav Mahler, Henri Dutilleux, Helmut Lachenmann, Alban Berg, and from all my previous compositional work.

Basically, the narrative of the piece is based on Ligeti’s notion of states, events and transformations, as he explained in some of his collected essays, published in 2001. My work attempts to present states that are transformed into new states. The music is formally divided into four sections: (a) Prelude, (b) Fusions / Convergences, (c) Static Layers, and (d) Postlude. The first part favors the idea of dialogue, multitudinousness, polyphonic contrasts, and very dense textures. The second section gives more prominence to soloistic figures, moving in and out of the complex diffuse texture. The third part investigates the idea of stasis - a very cheerful idea also developed by Ligeti - and aims to slowly create a very delicate atmosphere, contrasting the first two sections. The last part combines all the previous elements, now transformed, developed and merged continuously, leading to a brief coda concluding the whole piece.

---

1. Some considerations about my general compositional approach

“A mind is like a parachute. It only works if it is open.” Frank Zappa

For a long time, I have been attempting to incorporate heterogeneous elements from sources other than music into my compositional work. For example, film, literature, language, photography and philosophy are areas constantly providing me with elements that allow me to infuse my music with a sense of uniqueness, for which I am always struggling. As I am truly convinced music does not come from music - like babies don’t come from babies - one of my main goals, currently, is to try to develop a sort of “interdisciplinary musical craft”. Many composers I am drawn towards often attempt a similar approach.

2. Some considerations about the piece itself

*Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman* was written very quickly, in the span of only one and a half months. The seed of the initial idea for the piece was planted on January 12, 2013 when I attended the concert “*Fierce Beauty*” programmed by Jacaranda Music consortium. On that night, I heard the Ligeti piano concerto played by the pianist Gloria Cheng under the baton of the Hungarian conductor Peter Eötvös. Hearing this piece live, again, after a couple of years, gave me the strength necessary to tackle a similar chamber orchestral challenge. Coincidentally, this creative spark arrived at the same time as I was searching for musicians to play for my Final Graduate Recital at California State University, Northridge.

Instead of writing a piece, then searching for the musicians necessary to play it, I decided to write a piece specifically for the instruments which were available to me, thus utilizing the limitations as a creative trampoline. That is the main reason why the instrumentation used in the piece is considered very unusual, consisting of a chamber orchestra with four flutes (two C flutes, an alto flute and a bass flute), two brasses (one C trumpet and one tenor trombone), two grand pianos, three strings (a violin, a cello, and a double bass), and two percussionists playing

---

2 http://www.jacarandamusic.org/0112.php
similar set-ups (each one with a snare drum, a low tom-tom, three cymbals, a glockenspiel and a big tam-tam).

In addition to this very unique point of departure, an article by Ligeti, “States, events and transformations” also had a tremendous influence on Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman’s initial conception. In the article, Ligeti writes about his compositional process in general and how it is articulated in his orchestral work Apparitions. He recalls a dream he had in his early childhood in which he saw himself unable to reach his bed because the whole room was filled with webs. Some small creatures, which were trying to fly around a candle, were caught on the webs. Eventually, while trying to free themselves, they changed the web in an irreversible way. In his subsequent analytical article, the composer affirms that in Apparitions, “the sonic structures recall the network of the dream, and the course of the form as a whole corresponds to the process of transformation to which the web was subjected”. Thus, the dream relations serve to generate a type of narrative based on states, events and transformations (SET), which actively shapes the musical form:

The states are broken up by suddenly emerging events and are transformed under their influence; and vice-versa: the altered states also have a certain effect upon the type of events, for these must be of ever new kinds of character, in order to be able to further transform the transformed states. In this way arises an unceasing development: the formerly existing states and events reciprocally exclude their occurrences, and thus are irretrievable. (LIGETI 1993, 167-168)

This philosophical attitude toward his music is also related to my own perception of music in general and has deeply shaped the musical conception for this piece. I decided to organize the work, both in the small details and in the overall structure, with the assumption of formulating a state that gradually is transformed to generate a new one. To me, each state is a living organism, with its own mood, personality, shape and vocabulary. That idea has helped me to sense and then figure out the overall form of the music. Another approach from the SET concept is the idea of a constant transformation that leads to new states. It does not mean, however, that I avoided repetition or traditional development. It is true the piece presents a few repetitions, but they are not exact copies of a previous statement. They are, however, a product of the conflict and

---


4 Ibid. 165.
interaction of heterogeneous musical ideas. When repetitions are used, they are transfigured by the local events and by the general mood of the section.

Another musical concept Ligeti uses that I struggled to engage in my own compositional bag of tricks is the continuous relationships between the artist, his material and the world around him. Ligeti associates, for example, sounds with color, form, and texture; and form, color, and material quality with every acoustic sensation. For him, “time” is foggy white, “flowing slowly and uninterruptedly from left to right”\(^5\). Following an analogous approach when planning each section I improvised vaguely how a specific material would evolve over time and what would be its best dramatic possibilities. The process is almost like carving: giving the sounds a solid gestalt, a clear expression and a deep meaning. Nevertheless, it does not suggest I subordinated all musical organization to this intuitive process only. Both processes, the “rational” and the “improvised”, always came together during the writing of the piece. One led to the other and vice-versa. At other moments, to understand what came intuitively, I worked out many structural implications of the materials I wrote, which helped to create stronger possibilities, varied the materials involved and assured the cohesion of the piece which allowed a natural evolution of its dramaturgy.

The use of specific intervallic logic occurring only in crucial moments - referred by Ligeti as interval signal technique - usually is employed to greater emphasize and differentiate sections and their sub-articulations. This is one of Ligeti’s main contributions to the twentieth century harmonic language and also a device I use extensively throughout my score.

I had a very similar experience to that when listening to Ligeti’s Piano Concerto, especially its first movement, *Vivace molto ritmico e preciso*. There are many moments from the first movement of this piece where he operates with at least three highly differentiated main ideas. For example, in bars 28-50, the horn plays in a different pulse, for its long notes are never aligned with the pulse of the percussion and piano. The horn also presents a melody in a wide range that is unrelated to what the other two instruments play. In addition, the horn notes are played according to the tuning of the harmonic series. All these characteristics give a distinctive personality to the horn. The percussion gives emphasis on a periodic heart beat idea in 12/8. The piano part is already complex: it has two key signatures (white against black keys) and

\(^5\) Ibid. 129.
polyrhythm that mixes compound and simple meter. As mentioned, I developed similar ideas from Ligeti, not with the purpose of copying his incredible work, but because I think this was the closest strategy I could use to try to forge my own voice.

3. A brief formal analysis of the piece

_Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman_ can be structurally divided into four sections, each one with a particular state, mood, harmony, rhythm, orchestration, etc. Macroscopically speaking, the strongest articulation in the piece happens on bar 41. It groups together the first three sections and creates an enormous contrast with the fourth one.

The first section, lasting about 80 seconds, is built on many superimposed layers of sound, all derived from the violin “quasi-moto-perpetuo” line. The great initial tension is created by the constant interaction between two distinctive elements: (1) a rhapsodic, fast and flourished discourse that contaminates all the instruments, step by step and (2) many delicate slow lines in pianissimo that create a very resonant background and a distinct oniric aura. Those colors gradually build and dissolve almost improvisationally, while, at the same time, repeated note patterns and gestures fuse the various layers and create another type of atmosphere. This process is reaffirmed multiple times, in a “quasi stretto” way between the multiple soloists and the rest of the orchestra. Next, there is a less complex pitch material that combines string harmonics notes, woodwind “tenuti” lines and piano chords. As this subsection begins to unfold, more pitches are added to the harmonic building blocks creating a point of departure from where more melodic material is derived. This accumulation leads to a low register piano cluster on measure 14 that sounds almost like a gong attack.

At the beginning of the second part (bar 15), the melodic events gradually increase in length and range. The repeated notes are blended with a “micro-polyphonic” complex texture that culminates on the repeated percussive notes on bar 18. After this short percussion solo, more melodic elements are presented from measure 19 to 23. This strategy generates a “foreground versus background” moment, underlined by the Hauptstimmen / Nebenstimmen fragments and

---

6 Hauptstimme (German for primary voice) or Hauptsatz is the main voice, chief part; i.e., the contrapuntal or melodic line of primary importance, in opposition to Nebenstimme, a secondary contrapuntal or melodic part,
its short contrasting rhythmic elements. The culmination of this process concludes the second part.

The next section, beginning on bar 24 and ending on bar 40, is based completely in an attempt to create a perpetual sense of stasis. The string pedal tones, the cymbal continuous rolls and the absence of the flutes contribute to set up a strong contrasting mood. The atmosphere of this section is closed related with Olivier Messiaen’s concepts about Debussy and color\(^7\) and Luciano Berio’s ideas about movement and immobility\(^8\).

The static and “icy” texture is sustained until to letter G, the beginning of the last section. Fast rhapsodic piano figures are introduced contrasting deeply with the previous background. This section rapid leads to a sort of brief piano “cadenza” at letter H. After these flourished piano gestures, the texture is again blended with another “icy” sonority, now made basically with the superimposition of various flute whistle tones. This part concludes fusing all those previous elements.

The coda starts right at letter J, where the strings create a “quasi percussive” ostinato consisting of rapid out of the string note figuration. The pianos continue with the flourished gestures leading to the very end of the piece. Step by step a sort of harmonic pole is established with the constant repetition of the note A. After a couple of “quasi percussive” flute gestures, the piece ends with a secco stroke.

\(^7\) Messiaen, Olivier. “Messiaen on Debussy and color” YouTube video.

The figure above illustrates the basic articulations of *Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman*.

### 4. Conclusions

*Something in between Charlie Mingus and Charlie Kaufman* attempts to create a musical narrative based on the ability to evoke different states, colors, and meanings. It also deals with a sense of tension and resolution through the use of a harmonic language partially derived from Ligeti’s Piano and Violin Concerti. The harmonic language of the work is based upon the opposition of specific harmonic sonorities, which Ligeti calls the interval signal, and improvised moments that are unstable harmonically having no prominent polar patterns. At other times, the piece favors the use of more traditional strategies – like cadenzas, tuttis or solos - to characterize certain passages. In general, background and foreground material are based on non-traditional harmony and mostly on timbre. Because interval signals and specific pitch sets are placed at formally important moments and associated with changes of texture, they also are able to delineate the form of the work regardless the constant presence of all the different materials. The narrative of the work is based on the concept of states, events and transformations. Although many states are transformed into new states, all the processes involved shared similar characteristics, giving the piece a sense of continuation and cohesion.
To conclude, this piece can be viewed as a culmination of my experiences at CSUN and my studies up until now.
5. References


6. Appendix
delicatissimo sul ponticello e quasi incolore sempre

flautando sul ponticello. delicatissimo e quasi incolore sempre

sempre simile

sempre sciolto, quasi improvvisando. il più possibile continuo e scorrevole

Largo intensissimo ma con semplicità sempre (}

something in between chalie mingus and charlie kauffman

Misurato ma un poco più instabile (q = 50-56)

ppp sempre fluidissimo

ppp sempre f
Ancora più movido e drammatico, quasi swingando
legatissimo possibile

slow gliss.

ord.

slow gliss.

cluster with hand
Il più possibile continuo e scorrevole. Quasi groovando sempre (C=66-66)

Statico ma fantastico. Delicatissimo e con molta poesia (q = 50-56)
Fluidissimo ma scherzando (q = 50-56)

ppp  

f  

mp  

ppp  

f  

ppp  

almost improvised

ride 2

hold a until bar 34
senza vibrato

Luminoso quasi celestiale (G=50-56)

Vc.

Tbn.

Pno 1.

Pno 2.