

Chanticleer Festival 2000

Ana Cervantes

4. WORKING : THE MIRACLE OF CHAMBER MUSIC ... AND OREOS

Over and over again I am so moved and exhilarated by the PROCESS of ensemble music. One of the profoundly moving things for me about the two-week miracle which is the Chanticleer Festival was, quite simply, the way we worked together. The decision-making process makes me wish all statesmen (and women!) could be chamber musicians. I am awed, every time I think about it, by the miraculous process of consensus that we employ, which fully takes into account so many things: passion, the undeniable discipline of what the composer has written in the score, the way the quartet in its individuality and its whole might feel a *rallentando* (slowing down), just how that *ritardando* (holding back) in the Galindo could work WITHOUT a *diminuendo* (getting softer), as Caroline imagines it. Having all that imagination around me is like breathing, at some incredible height, rarefied air which nevertheless is astonishingly rich.

Psychotherapists should get hold of this ... here we are, all strong individuals, each of us with opinions, with CONVICTIONS. Yet the process of working out how the music might go is extraordinarily delicate, thoughtful, caring. Informed by impulse and caprice, but also by experience and patience. The entire process sheltered, blessed, by the awareness that we're in the service of something larger than our individual selves, larger than the ensemble: the music. The process of listening, of talking things out, of trying different ways, isn't wimpy or wussy. On the contrary - the force of passion it brings to bear is astounding, world-bending, miraculous.

I think later, so many times, If only more people could be like this in their personal and (by extension) their political relationships, if only they could have this sense of being part of something, in service to something, greater than their individual selves. Surely we would act better, surely our imaginations would be inspired to craft ways of resolving things which would generate not conflict and competition but this irresistible cooperative force which is ensemble.

And let's be under no illusion that this just goes for "classical" music, whatever that means. On the contrary, it's the same for all small ensemble music with one to an instrument, be it a jazz trio or an African percussion ensemble, a mariachi group or a woodwind quintet. Some of the greatest ensemble playing I've ever heard came from bass player Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker. It showed me once again how the bass continues to be the foundation of everything and rules supreme as it did for Johann Sebastian Bach: the fact that Jack and Ginger did it using a language called "rock and roll" is wonderful but not central.

Now, during those two weeks in Indiana, I am playing with that extraordinary multiphonic instrument which is, as Arnold Steinhardt says, "Indivisible by Four" ... the string quartet, perhaps the eighth wonder of the world. Faster than any computer, our ears adjust to the different sonic universe in which they find themselves: piano doubling the cello, imitating the 2nd violin, handing off to the viola. All the marks I've made in my Galindo, in my Brahms, start to make real sonic sense. To hand off well to Jenny here I have to voice higher than I'd thought

in the right hand, and with more authority; there in that other spot I don't need to exert myself because Elizabeth's cello, doubling my left hand, will sound more resonantly, and Brahms, angel composer that he was, knew it. That's why he didn't give me octaves in the left hand ...

For an extended time, I played predominantly ensemble music, with the odd solo piece thrown in for variety. Finally some kind of wave lifted me up with an irresistible momentum and I gravitated to playing almost entirely solo music. There was a transitional period, then, during which I worried about the lack of an ensemble partner, and about what that might mean to my playing. Late one night a thought crystallized for me: that even when you are playing as a soloist, you never play alone. There is always an ensemble partner: the music, which like any good partner guides you, follows you, responds to you, is always there. Thereafter, whether playing chamber or solo music, I always try to remember an extra stand, there for that invisible ensemble partner.

When I was even younger, before I went away to school to study music, I somehow picked up from the prevailing attitudes of the day that playing as anything but a soloist was somehow inferior. Sure, Gerald Moore was a great accompanist, but he was "only" an accompanist, the implication being that he didn't have the chops to do anything "better". The day I walked into Luis García-Renart's chamber music class at Bard College and got handed the score to the Mendelssohn D-minor Piano Trio, I started learning differently. How could I not? This was music unlike any I'd ever heard in my life. And the incredible experience of making this music with other people - no way could this be less exciting or challenging than playing Chopin Etudes all by myself!

Still later I learned that the greats of the past never made any qualitative distinction between solo and ensemble playing ... Horzowski played Beethoven Piano Sonatas as a soloist, played Beethoven Cello and Piano Sonatas with Casals, played Beethoven Piano Trios with Casals and Thibaud. The day I learned that Horzowski played Schubert's extraordinary song cycle "Winterreise" with the great Danish tenor Axel Schiotz in Carnegie Hall and performed it FOR MEMORY I just about died with delight. To play "Winterreise" for memory with a great singer was something I'd longed to do. It was a tremendous validation to know that one of my musical heroes of the past had done just that, with no tarnish to his reputation. Baby pianists, I suppose, have to wrestle with things like this and finally learn that these seemingly fearsome barriers, in the words of my friend the *rumbero*, "are transparent ... you can walk right through them".

The rhythm of our rehearsing, intensive during those first five days, is punctuated by our own individual practicing (there are a certain number of the standard jokes about pianists who would practice even in their sleep if only they could) and by the delight of first reading and then working on Mozart with Salvo. One day we leap into Beethoven Piano and Violin Sonatas (as all pianists know, that is how he titled them, NOT Violin and Piano Sonatas) and he sweet-talks me into reading the Kreutzer, which is probably harder for the piano than the fiddle. For some silly reason, it's a piece I've never learned, and even after intensive Brahms and Galindo and Márquez for a week, I am sweating afterwards, I can assure you!

As we perform it, the program itself acquires a rhythm that both fulfills and moves beyond its original promise. The Quartet begins with the pizzicato movement of the Bartók Fourth and continues with the Shostakovich Adagio and Allegretto; there's an implied suspense here

because we haven't yet heard the voice of the piano. When we finally do hear it, with the elegant and intense first movement of the Emanuel Bach Sonata, of course it's alone. The Bach, in spite of its relatively austere textures, covers a huge emotional gamut. It's followed by *Días de Mar y Río (Days of Sea and River)* of Márquez, a marvel of a piano piece full of Caribbean harmonies and rhythms, as well as some big romantic sections full of luscious piano writing. Finally, we join together with the little folk tune "Oaxaca", an appetizer of our quintet sound; then the quartet alone plays the plaintive and passionate 4AM sounds of Lara's *Solamente Una Vez*. Only then, after the intermission, do we finally unite for the Galindo. It opens with a lamenting introduction played alone by the rich contralto of Jenny's viola, and ends with a ruminative cello solo from Elizabeth. The tension is then upped even further by Ravel's *Tzigane (Gypsy)* for violin and piano (Ravel's transcription of his orchestral composition) in which Salvo and I mount a ferocious gypsy flirtation that ends with a barnburner nonstop *accelerando*. Finally everyone is brought to heaven by the first movement of the Brahms, intricate, rich, vital.

Elizabeth discovered in her research on the piece that Brahms wrote two other versions before being satisfied with this final, quintet version. The first was for string quartet and cello and the second was for two pianos. Hearing how the ideas develop in the piece, seeing how he built it and how its architecture works, you understand how this had to be, how in the end the complexity of what he was hearing in his head, wonderful Brahms, could be satisfied only by the polyphonic capacity of the piano working together with that other multi-voiced instrument which is the string quartet.

Wanting to read the second movement of the Brahms becomes, with affection, another running joke of the Festival. I am just as much in love with that movement as I am with the first: like loving two different people or different aspects of the same person. It has a heartbreaking tenderness that manages to be enormously passionate at the same time, with that patented Brahms slow-movement character. That character is due partly I suppose to his skillful development of the melody which is based on a simple chord progression; and his sagacious use of the lower and middle registers of the piano, giving enormous warmth and affection to the sound. It's like a preview of the late Piano Intermezzi, opus 118, 119. OK, OK, it really is just a big piano solo with quartet accompaniment, as Caroline said. But what a solo it is, what heaven to play such a solo with the good company of a string quartet!

On the food side, our Oreo consumption, while perhaps not surpassing all previous records, is impressive. One day Jenny and I go food shopping in Richmond and return with (as always) cookies. They never make it from the shopping bag to the kitchen counter, being intercepted along the way by the adept hand of Rubén. Additionally, we musicians and our camp-followers are fortified by periodic trips to the Dairy Queen. I say THE Dairy Queen advisedly: there are three in Richmond, and the one to which we go is the only one awarded Caroline's seal of approval. The other two apparently just don't measure up.



Cervantes, Elizabeth, Caroline, Salvo, and Rubén (Jenny is mysteriously missing from this picture)

We have a couple of adrenalizing Chinese Checkers games, one with all five of us plus Caroline's husband Bob, and the other just Caroline, Salvo and me. They are ferociously and hysterically competitive: I, who have not played this game since about the age of eight, get better FAST. We also play, a couple of times, a game called "Balderdash" which Rubén and Elizabeth have brought, in which you get to make up outrageous fake facts and the number of people who believe your invention determines your score.

Our idle conversation gets into all sorts of things. At one point, Salvo's endless teasing of his "all-girl band" inspires me to ask him if he has younger sisters. He admits to it. "a-HAH!" I say, "that explains it". Another time we get to talking about diminutives in different languages. There's Rubén, from El Salvador, and I half-Mexican, and Salvo from Italy, so we compare Spanish and Italian, both of which have a serious propensity for making affectionate name diminutives. It turns out that there are various diminutives for Salvatore, among them Salvo and also Salvucho; for Ana there is Anina and Anaré. Salvo has been Salvo almost from the beginning but after this conversation he becomes, from time to time for me at least, Salvucho. When he calls me Anaré that last morning, I feel a little as though some older brother I never had is consoling me for the ice cream for which we won't have time today.

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