

## IN CELEBRATION OF STEVEN STUCKY

“One kind of artist is always striving to annihilate the past, to make the world anew in each new work, and so to triumph over the dead weight of routine. I am the other kind. I am the kind who only sees his way forward by standing on the shoulders of those who have cleared the path ahead.”

— Steven Stucky

Tonight we celebrate the life and music of Steven Stucky in a program that comprises music by Stucky, some of the composers he loved and admired most—on whose shoulders he proudly, unrepentantly stood—and a few of the myriad younger composers he championed and guided.

It's impossible not to hear the deep and manifold connections that bind the works on tonight's program together, which form an uninterrupted stream of artistic creativity from Brahms through today. The cascading thirds of Brahms's Op. 119, No. 1 tonight can be heard as foreshadowing the “tall tertian chords” Stucky so lovingly documented in his early study of Lutosławski's music, and that permeate the fast sections of his own Sonata for Piano that closes tonight's program.

“Seren, luminoso” from Stucky's *Album Leaves* (written for and dedicated to tonight's pianist, Xak Bjerken), is a masterful miniature: seven (or is it eight?) phrases that can be heard as first, shortening, then broadly expanding, then reprising (a fifth higher); or, as a simple expansion of register from the center to middle-outer registers of the piano, pulling expressively against the only dynamic indication in the movement: *piano sempre ed intimo*. Throughout the texture is homophonic but densely chromatic, mixing the texture of chorale and the resonance of distant bells.

Clanging bells announce Christopher Stark's *in memory*, composed for tonight's concert. Stark memorializes his teacher in the time-honored tradition, by converting S(teen) E(dward) S(tucky) into the pitches E-flat–E–E-flat, which sound, first hammered in the lowest register of the piano, and then, after a restless, harmonically cyclical interlude, high up in the register of the work's opening bells. The piece ends in a gentle wash of complementary tonalities (tonal, whole-tone), with S–E–S continuing to sound in the center of it all, as well as ensconced in the now distant bells. The bell chords themselves come from the end of *Les noces*, and Stark notes that his last correspondence with Stucky included “us sharing our admiration for that ending.”

Three of the composers on tonight's program—Bartók, Lutosławski, and Stucky himself—openly acknowledged their debt to Debussy. His *Syrinx*, composed in 1913 (the year of Lutosławski's birth), makes it clear why: with its masterful mixing of tonalities (the 3-note chromatic cells, pentatonic flourishes, and—saved for the very end—a simple descending whole-tone scale), it unfolds in what Stucky has called a “stream-of-consciousness narrative,” and presents a post-functional manner by which to organize harmonically viable forms, something all three composers exploited in their own music.

“Since an early age,” Stucky also harbored a love for the *Spanish Songbook* of Hugo Wolf, and in 2008 he arranged a set of eight of its songs for various singers with orchestra. His version of “Bedeckt mich mit Blumen” was dedicated to Rachel Calloway, who sings it tonight in Wolf's original version. For Rachel, this song “reflects Steve's love for his friends, music, life, and the world around him.” In the great romantic tradition, Wolf sustains an understated ecstasy by reserving for the final bars, after the singer has finished, the song's only cadence in the tonic.

The German lieder tradition suffuses *Aus der Jugendzeit*, into which Stucky weaves music by Schoenberg (*Pierrot Lunaire*) and Mahler (*Das Lied von der Erde*), creating what he calls “the fabric of yearning for a time and a musical language long past.” And though we tend to think of the German and French traditions as polar opposites, Stucky reminds us that, at least in the twentieth century, they are not so: he notes that Debussy had a copy of *Pierrot Lunaire* on his piano when he died, suggesting “it was one of the last scores he was studying.” Although fixated on the past, *Aus der Jugendzeit* was a piece for beginnings, too: it marked Stucky's first collaboration with the Dolce Suono Ensemble and instigated a lasting artistic partnership with DSE and its founder Mimi Stillman, who performs it tonight.

Stucky has referred to his extant piano catalog, with characteristic humility, as “vanishingly small.” When he set to writing his *Album Leaves*, he wrote short pieces that each depend “on the clarity, pungency, and immediacy of a

single, arresting sound-image.” He also leaned heavily on the two twentieth-century composers that reinvented the piano the most: Debussy and Bartók. It’s easy to hear how the perfumed arabesques of Debussy’s *Voiles* and the biting, percussive dissonances of Bartók’s *Free Variations* are each reflected and refracted in the selections from *Album Leaves* paired with them tonight, as if Stucky is holding a private conversation with each, calling down the decades that separate them. As a centerpiece interrupting this glimpse into the composer’s studio is the haunting and—incredibly, given its brevity—transfiguring *Dirge* by Bartók.

Lutosławski’s *Grave* for cello and piano was composed *in memoriam* the Polish musicologist and Debussy specialist Stefan Jarociński, and begins by quoting the first four notes of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. These opening four “white” notes are immediately contrasted with a handful of “black” notes, and the entire work, which Lutosławski crafts to provide “the illusion of a quickening tempo,” springs from this juxtaposition.

So, too, Stucky’s *Dialoghi* for solo cello. He begins with a set of six, rising “white” notes that spell “ELINOR” (Frey—the work’s dedicatee), and immediately falls down through a soft fluttering of “black” notes. Both these elements—the name-theme and juxtaposition of “white” and “black” notes—permeate the seven variations that follow, and the work ends with a registerally (not literally) inverted restatement of the name-theme. The title *Dialoghi* is lovely in tonight’s context, as we hear this piece beside Lutosławski’s *Grave*, but Stucky also stresses in his notes the “dialogues” that exist in friendship, in “conversations about books, music, paintings, films, psychology, religion, food, and all things Italian (hence the Italian title).”

The “white” notes that serve as the starting point for Lutosławski’s *Grave* and Stucky’s *Dialoghi* are spun into the principal sound world of Harold Meltzer’s *Two Songs from Silas Marner*. Friendship is at the heart of these songs, too: Meltzer recalls that this was the first piece of his that Stucky heard, and he reached out to him, initiating a long friendship. Reflecting on George Eliot’s tale tonight, I’m struck by the easy analogy between the solitary work of the composer and the miserly weaver, spinning out the stuff of his precious gold in solitude.

James Matheson’s “Clouds ripped open” features a restless piano part, with triads constantly morphing one into another, their borders blurred as in a rainbow. Ringing bells have been present in many of tonight’s works, and they return here at the beginning of “Is my soul asleep?” Matheson (who studied with Stucky) describes Machado’s poems as “urgent, modern, and sometimes devastating in the sheer loneliness of their perspective,” but not without hope: the two stanzas of this last song are given lovely poetic tempi, first “Lost,” and then “Found; slower,” and the music aspires to eternity in its closing tintinnabulations.

It is astonishing to hear Stucky’s Sonata for Piano tonight in such close proximity to his *Album Leaves*. Though following it by a dozen years, the Sonata is his only subsequent foray into writing for solo piano, and any reservations Stucky had about writing for the piano seem to have been completely overcome. Stucky identifies the primary materials of the work: the opening “grim, gruff music” juxtaposed with “a tiny wisp of arioso melody,” and a repeating, “tolling bell.” From these he fashions a powerful, monumental structure, the centerpiece of which is an imposing chorale that literally takes over the work. Stucky describes the ending of the Sonata:

If one thought of a piece like this as a struggle between opposing musics—turbulent vs. lyrical vs. calm vs. light-hearted—then one might interpret the close as a somber outcome. But I prefer to think of it as what Wordsworth called “emotion recollected in tranquility.” The exuberant fast sections and the luminous chorale really are the twin hearts of the piece for me. Thus for me, despite the substantial quantity of dark music, the light carries the day.

The Sonata is dedicated, simply, “to my wife Kristen.”

In the days and now weeks since Steve’s death there has been a constant stream of tributes and reminiscences online and in print. These remembrances—professional and personal—are a testament to the far-reaching impact he has had. Running through them all is a constant thread: Steve’s humility, his graciousness, his willingness to help, advocate, and praise when he could. He was a great citizen of the American musical community, “a man,” his son Matthew has beautifully written, “of bottomless kindness and empathy,” and we are inestimably poorer without him. One can’t help but wonder why these qualities of his, so universally praised and admired, are nonetheless so rare. Kristen Frey Stucky has poignantly urged us to “honor Steve’s life by continuing to appreciate his music and the kindness that he conveyed to all.” Let us also honor him in this way: by going and doing likewise.

— Jeremy Gill