

Score/Music Review

Jonathan Bailey Holland: Halcyon Sun, for Orchestra. Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Paavo Järvi, cond.

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J. Anthony Allen: Tears of Eros, for Orchestra. Peabody Symphony Orchestra, Erin Freeman, cond.

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TOWARDS A NEW KIND OF COMMON PRACTICE

What happened to modal dissonance in the last century? Ravel carefully worked chords consisting of four to seven notes of modal scales in many of his works, and such harmonies--and the musical gestures associated with them--became one of the hallmarks of his style. One need look no further than the fundamental musical cadence of his masterpiece, the opera *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, and his use of the simple but profound d minor to G major cluster progression, to see the power of modal harmony. However, the development of this kind of harmony was largely abandoned in the experimental fervor of that time, and for a large part of the century to come.

Jonathan Bailey Holland and J. Anthony Allen have given us rare and magnificent works in *Halcyon Sun* and *Tears of Eros*. Yet perhaps more important, these pieces are virtual treatises on the way common-practice harmony might have proceeded a hundred years ago had not attitudes toward the very conception of music fundamentally changed at that time. Almost every harmony is a modal cluster of the kind mentioned earlier. The harmonic language is not only one of great aural necessity (not enough works have yet been written in this language--that oversight is for future composers to remedy) but tremendous aural beauty; and because both composers are so deeply connected to their language on an aural and ultimately emotional level, the music flows from them with a kind of naturalness so rare in the still largely experimental climate of the early twenty-first century. How can I express how fundamental, how musical these pieces are? So free from the confining theories of the last century, this music lives in the spirit of the best composers of the past, where the musical language was such an integral part of the very being of the work that it was transcended, leaving just the pure emotion.

The first movement of Holland's *Halcyon Sun* is made up of two simple musical elements: the whole-and-half step. This technical simplicity allows Holland tremendous freedom in building the structure of the movement. He has learned well lessons taught by Steve Reich and Michael Torke—minimal and post-minimal music being one of the first attempts to find a way back to this “abandoned” harmony—but his music has none of the precalculated “minimalist” feeling which mars some of that music and places it still in the “experimental” vein. He has learned musical lessons from them, though, and in his hands “minimalism” becomes a purely musical gesture much as eighteenth-century counterpoint became a purely musical gesture in Bach's music. The second movement is also quite “minimalist”, yet expressively so. Holland uses the whole/half step limitations set up in the first movement, and begins to hint at some of the more sudden modulations which become an integral part of the third movement. The final movement builds upon the simplicity of the first movement and adds to the musical grammar the distant and sudden modulations of the second movement. What is most significant about this work is Holland's absolute belief and certainty in the parameters of his chosen language. His connection to harmony especially is one born of pure emotion, a connection so important to pre-twentieth century composers, but one almost lost in the experimental welter of the last century. As these marvelous harmonies and melodies unfold, one forgets utterly about the musical language, and experiences only the emotions being expressed so clearly.

Throughout the piece Holland intelligently uses recently defined “centric” harmonic and melodic techniques, most notably SLIDE-type modulations, where the third of a triad “slides” from major to minor or vice versa. Importantly, such modulations rest solidly on the logic of the overtone series in the context of equal temperment, still the most sophisticated development in musical language from the standpoint of expressiveness in Western music, yet are largely modal and owe little to common-practice ideals of tritone resolution. From a lingual and ultimately expressive standpoint this music is completely contemporary.

In J. Anthony Allen's *Tears of Eros*, compositional procedures are similar from the standpoint of musical syntax, especially in the extended use of modal cluster harmonies. This piece is spoken in the same language as the Holland, and were they put together on a concert this lingual consistency would hearken back to pre-twentieth century concerts in that both composers are using much of the same musical syntax—and not using it experimentally, but above all expressively. Such a concert would have been rare indeed in the past century; but thankfully a new generation is hearkening back to time-tested emotional content set very much in the context of the present century, and I hope that such concerts become commonplace

again.

After initial orchestral flourishes utilizing skillfully and colorfully orchestrated modal clusters the texture contracts into a slow dirge for strings, building to a climax where wind textures become a modal blur creating large standing yet coruscating modal tone clusters. A section of ascending and descending tone clusters spaced out in the percussive instruments is permeated with melodic fragments in winds, strings, and brass which highlight the surrounding harmony. Beautiful unto themselves, these fragments; yet by highlighting particularly resonant places in the harmony they work melodically and harmonically with equal effectiveness, a kind of contrapuntal skill prized particularly by composers of the Baroque. This section gives way to its logical outcome: percussion instruments given improvisatory textures over the prevailing harmonies, and strings small canonic statements which, by remaining only short motives, serve to keep the percussion tone clusters in the forefront of the listener's imagination by not calling too much attention to themselves—again a balance of melody and harmony worthy of the Baroque era. The next section is truly an apotheosis of this tone cluster/motive texture, and becomes something of a grand Chaconne consisting of short repeated modal cluster progressions in which all the former harmonic and melodic techniques reach a fever pitch in all instruments, breaking at the climax into a noble, lengthier melody in the strings. Shortly the texture becomes fully fragmented, as if holding on to a longer melody is anathema to this piece, which also serves to elevate the importance of the harmony. The final section is a kind of inversion of the slow string material near the beginning, high violins becoming the sustaining element rather than the basses of the first part.

These two works invoke for me a concept which might be called “The Middle Way” in music. So much of the musical rhetoric of the last half-century involved the experimental that the only cogent argument developed to counter it was from the “Derriere Guard”, those composers who would largely return to the pre-twentieth century in their works. On one side Cage, Babbitt, Boulez, et al.; on the other, the growing Romantic-era blandness of the music that was taking the place of the “who cares if you listen” concert music: the slew of post-John Williams movie scores and the orchestral treacle of such popular tunesmiths as Tim Janis. Yet in the cultural vacuum created by the former the latter has achieved an almost laughable popularity—laughable were it not for how seriously many concert goers take it. “The Middle Way”—or perhaps “Via Media”—represented by composers such as Copland and Dello Joio in the first part of the century was almost completely subsumed under the pressure of the experimentalists, and its return under the influence of the latter-day commercial musics is often spotty. These two pieces represent for me a powerful resurgence of the “Via Media”: works which remind us of the power of consistency in musical language—a language become universal in both composer's hands—and point the way to something like a new kind of common-practice, a widely used musical language which grows as a vehicle of expression the more composers develop it in similar yet different ways.

The recordings, in spite of occasional audience noise, are must-haves in order to understand the resurgence of this approach to musical language. Both performances are sensitive and glorious; but above all the music itself is of immense power and range, fueled by the astounding musical language and the profound depth of feeling which that language brings to us. Is it not the job of language, whether musical or written, to convey expression? In my opinion this is perhaps the greatest oversight of the last century, when the discovery of new musical languages became an end in itself rather than a means to an end.

Both composer's scores are models of clarity, especially impressive given the complexity of the music. CD's/mp3's and scores may be purchased directly from the composers at their respective websites given above.

Gregory Hall