

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: Benet Casablanca

Thursday, February 25, 2010 at 8:00PM

*Music is an attempt to capture the most valuable of human possessions:
time, made from a myriad fleeting moments consumed in the very flash of light that marks their birth.*
—Benet Casablanca

Born in 1956, Benet Casablanca belongs to the strong generation of Spanish composers that emerged after the death of General Franco, in 1975, and—perhaps just as important for Spain's sense of itself—after the country joined NATO (1982) and the European Economic Community (1986). Thus installed among the great western nations, Spain rapidly set about developing a musical culture to match, a culture not necessarily beholden to the land's immensely powerful traditions.

It was partly to counterbalance those traditions that, back in 1923, Roberto Gerhard had gone to Vienna to study with Schoenberg. Casablanca—like Gerhard, a Catalan, from Sabadell in the Barcelona hinterland—chose the same destination almost 60 years later to complete his training with Friedrich Cerha and Karl-Heinz Füssl. In his case, though, a stay in the Austrian capital merely confirmed the Schoenbergian allegiance he had been expressing abundantly since his late teens.

Nearly all his early works are for solo instruments or small combinations such as string quartet (*Five Interludes*, 1983, written in Vienna) or piano trio (*Movement*, 1984, the piece with which he made his New York debut in 1986, at Carnegie Recital Hall). In 1988 came his first orchestral scores, followed by *Epigrams* for mixed sextet (1990), which represents a watershed, his music becoming more concise, more incisively characterful, more colorful, and more harmonically impelled, without losing the surging polyphonic activity and lively pulsed rhythm that mark it out.

Though short forms—more epigrams, aphorisms, haiku—occur repeatedly in his subsequent output, he has recently been producing compositions on a much larger scale, including his Third String Quartet (2008-2009) and three symphonic works: *The Dark Backward of Time* (2005), *Alter Klang* (2006), and *Darkness Visible* (2008). While keeping up his energetic creative activity, he has also devoted time to scholarship and teaching, gaining his doctorate for a thesis on humor in music and becoming director of the Conservatori del Liceu in Barcelona. Recordings of his music include three on the Naxos label, one pretty much replicating tonight's program—without the new piece, of course, but with older compositions including *Epigrams*.

New Epigrams

I. Con moto

II. Calmo, tranquillo molto – Adagio

III. Scherzando (con moto)

Epigrams was scored for the regular new-music sextet of flute and clarinet, violin and cello, piano and percussion; *New Epigrams*, written seven years later, in the spring of 1997, is for an 11-piece ensemble. As befits the title, the movements are short, lasting together not much more than 10 minutes, and each is formed from smaller elements, down to solos and ensembles just a few measures long in the volatile first. This provides an excellent introduction to Casablanca's way of thinking—how instruments will circle around emphasized pitches along the harmonic course, how harmonies are established by arpeggios and ostinatos, whose repetitions bring rest or an urge toward onward motion, and how a regular pulse drives a music of dancing energies.

The harmonic procedures—even the harmonies—are not so different in the second piece, but this is a slow movement. After the introduction, an adagio is proposed by the cello at the head of a string trio. Then comes a passage marked *estatico*, mostly in the high treble, with string harmonics and, at first, effects produced with their fingernails by the pianist and horn player. The region of Bartók's insect-filled night music is close by. Eventually, the strings restore the adagio; finally, the music evaporates.

A scintillant scherzo-finale rounds off the set, with, the composer suggests, the piano sneaking forward to assume a quasi-concerto role.

Little Night Music

I. Moderato

II. Lento (quasi Passacaglia)

It is a title that has come through barriers of time and language: *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (Mozart, 1787), *Piccola musica notturna* (Dallapiccola, 1954), *A Little Night Music* (Sondheim, 1973). Casablanca's contribution—*Petita música notturna*, to give it its original Catalan title—clears its own space within this diverse repertory, being a pair of atmospheric movements for the unusual but highly effective ensemble of flute and clarinet with piano, harp, and percussion, written in February–March 1992 and dedicated to the composer's daughter, then a small child.

The opening is for the wind players alone; one might recall the seductive duet for these instruments in the middle movement of the *New Epigrams*. A sudden move to a quicker tempo challenges the mood, but alert calm is restored.

After this comes a movement the composer likens to a passacaglia for its slowness, regularity, and weight. Once again, this time following a beautiful solo for alto flute, the feeling switches, moving swiftly to fearsome multiphonics (chords) on the wind instruments, and switches again before the music settles back into itself.

Writing of the piece, Casablanca refers to “the different colors of silence and the tremor of the night, palpating and mysterious.”

Four Darks in Red

Invited by George Steel and commissioned by Miller Theatre, Casablanca wrote this 12-minute chamber symphony between May and October last year. Its starting point, acknowledged in the title, was the Mark Rothko painting of 1958, a canvas normally on show at the Whitney Museum but on loan to Tate Modern when Casablanca was visiting London in October 2008, for a performance of his *Seven Scenes from Hamlet*. In that respect, the work belongs with his *Alter Klang*, similarly stimulated by Paul Klee's checkerboard of glowing dusky colors. It belongs, too, with other “darks” among the composer's recent works—not only his orchestral compositions *The Dark Backward of Time* and *Darkness Visible* but also his Third Quartet, with its epigraph from W.B. Yeats: “raging in the dark—the night's remorse.”

Casablanca has said something about how he hears the Rothko painting, with its characteristic array of hovering and shadowy rectangles, the second down of the four being the biggest and blackest: “The formal organization of the musical piece—the score consists of four sections that develop seamlessly—somehow reveals a connection with the four major areas that shape the picture, read from top to bottom (so, for example, the dark zone motivates the general shift toward the lower registers of the orchestra). In any case, as is typical of my musical thinking, the mood of the piece is never descriptive or programmatic. It is an empathic, abstract response to the deep admiration I feel for the language and achievement of this great artist, for his work's powerful presence and naked expressivity, animated by intense internal drives.”

A sense of animation arrives at once in the brilliant and propulsive opening, which lasts not much more than a minute before a downward turn in the bass takes the music into its second section. This much longer and calmer movement reaches its goal in a solo from the alto flute, which is immediately followed by the third section: a quasi-scherzo with a contrasting middle section and an imposing end.

Casablanca's words take us on from here: “The slow section that opens Part IV gradually moves toward a contemplative and more ecstatic atmosphere, whose quietness leads to a suspension of time and the threshold of silence. At this point, the score includes the following quotation from Rothko: ‘Silence is so accurate.’ There follows the lively and vigorous conclusion, with the character of a stretta, including some highly stylized references to American popular music and leading the work to an exultant close.”

Seven Scenes from Hamlet

I. Introduction

II. At Court: Suspicions

III. To be or not to be

IV. Ophelia

V. The Players' Party: A Jig

VI. Yorick: Ophelia's Burial

VII. Ending

Shakespeare's longest play has proved endless in its ramifications—not least, musical, including scores by composers ranging from Berlioz, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, and Richard Strauss to Shostakovich, Wolpe, Knussen, and Wolfgang Rihm, not to mention full-scale operatic treatments by Ambroise Thomas, Franco Faccio (on a libretto by Boito), and Humphrey Searle. Casablancas's 1989 take is a sequence of scenes played out in music to prompts from an actor, speaking mostly for the prince. Since the piece thus incorporates its own rather superior program notes, any further commentary may be superfluous.

However, perhaps some of the movements call for a little more comment. The first, uniquely, is cued by a character other than Hamlet: Horatio, to whom the Ghost declines to speak, so that what we hear could be, after the eeriness of the supernatural being's appearance (celesta, string harmonics, fluttertonguing clarinet, fingernails tapping on brass instrument bells), the sound of its silence. There follows a labyrinth of overt and covert signs for Claudius's court, and then a double fugue on Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, led by the viola naming him in its opening notes, H–A(ml)–E(t) in German nomenclature representing B–A–E. This movement ends with its beginning played in reverse.

Ophelia is portrayed in a slow movement, *larghetto amoroso*, on a flute theme, and the players in a jig, rumbustious yet exact. The sixth scene is the only one with speech and music together, as Hamlet turns from Yorick's grave to Ophelia's, at which point her music returns. His own dying words, "The rest is silence," are succeeded by distinctly unsilent music: a *moto perpetuo* in which different instruments and groups race after each other to make their statements over the bodies on the stage. Some of this is recollection, and eventually we meet the Ghost again. But the very last measures, with string quartet climbing away, leave many questions open.