

An Unanswered Question

Robert Beaser

Those of us who work exclusively in coaxing meaning from sounds—extracting coherence from building blocks of self-referential materials that have no significance beyond themselves and their contextual definitions—can find ourselves in a state of stupefied representational overload in the presence of the iconography of a painting. When I first met and became friends with Simon Dinnerstein at the American Academy in Rome in September of 1977, it was clear to me that as composer and artist, we were both somehow wrestling with similar historical imperatives: in a moment of rigid modernism, institutional abstraction, the cult of the avant-garde, how could we recover the past without losing our location in the present? Simon's response to this unanswered question had already begun in his monumental *Fulbright Triptych*, which he was shipping from Kassel, Germany, to New York in preparation for an exhibition at the Staempfli Gallery. I recall viewing it there for the first time in 1979. It troubled and confused me. I felt as though I had been lured into some inscrutable alternate universe where time was bursting at random vectors, where the age-old Catholic Trinity of Giotto had been body-snatched and replaced with sphinxlike Brooklyn figures staring blankly at me, surrounded by a casual hodgepodge of pinned-up artifacts floating in virtual space, challenging me to accept their anachronistic rights. In short, I knew I was in the presence of a fearless artist. I was immediately infatuated.

Music unfolds in real time, a series of articulated sounds moving across a linear plane, in chronological progressions which—in order to establish meaning—need to relate at all moments that have occurred prior and project what could happen in the future. Often music of excessive complication masquerades as art by preying, like the “emperor's new clothes,” on a listener's insecurities and latent pretensions. Complication in music obfuscates meaning by stuffing a work full of information overload. The density and rapidity of the flow is too much for a listener to aurally assimilate—this has been scientifically studied—and therefore we cannot build an understanding of how one parameter speaks to another. Many people are cowed into submission by the sheer amount of detail thrown at them, and either give up because they feel that

they are too uneducated, or praise it grandly because they can't understand it. When I hear works like this, I tend to be pulled and bent like a branch, and then snap. But I like to make a crucial distinction between complication and complexity. Complexity can be defined as a deep saturation of the many parameters of musical syntax, creating multiple layers of interlaced meaning, which interact over time and provide a rich and textured aural experience that is both visceral and intellectual. In other words, musical arguments need to first create expectations in the listener. Once these expectations are created, over time they can either be delayed (read: deceptive cadences), thwarted, transformed, or ultimately met. Since absolute music cannot refer to anything but itself, these expectations need to be built by contextualizing all of the musical material—and parameters—within a piece, so that the material can assume significance beyond itself and become part of a compelling discourse.

A composer needs to adjust his ears when looking at a painting. While representational painting may have the disadvantage of not unfolding in real time, it has the distinct advantage of working with symbols which refer to things outside of themselves—and expectations do not have to be created by organizing images solely through contextualizing them, because they have meanings already built-in. It is pretty hard for me not to see a fixed canvas as something which is alive in time and space. In some of Dinnerstein's later works, this motion is brought front and center, such as his spectral and redemptive *Night*, where juxtapositions and reiterations provide the fulcrum for a sense of haunting movement. But *The Fulbright Triptych* is a work that is deceptively static at first. This is probably why I was nonplussed. I knew, however, that all was not what it seemed. As I studied it, I began to see movement in the details, tension in the underlying architecture, and I began to uncover the poetry in the dreamlike suspension of interior and exterior worlds, the dance between the characters and their antecedents, and the multifarious artifacts and fragments which orbit around them, pulling them forward and backward in history. That there was complexity in the layering of these elements was clear and undeniable from my very first encounter, even if their precise meaning was elusive.

I am drawn to hybrids in music: Palestrina (and others of his time) interpolated the popular secular tune “L’homme armé” into the most sacred of their church Mass

settings; Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*—where fragments of eighteenth-century Pergolesi (which we now know to actually be spurious) are dressed up in twentieth-century neoclassical attire—or conversely placing reworked Lithuanian folk tunes at the opening of his sacred *Symphony of Psalms*; Charles Ives creating sonic tapestries which intermix popular café music and military marching band fragments with eerie chromatic cluster chords to create his boldly hallucinogenic *Central Park in the Dark*. Many others, from Liszt to Ravel to Orff to Bartók, use folk sources to form the bones and sinew of classical orchestral essays, all of which ultimately influence my own works, in pieces such as *Mountain Songs* (1985), which recast Appalachian folk tunes in unexpected architecture, rhythms, and context such that listeners aren't exactly sure just what they are hearing. This very uncertainty, “neither fish nor fowl,” the gap between what is familiar and what is new, that ambiguous distance which creates something wholly “other,” is what drew me to *The Fulbright Triptych*. I felt as though I had seen this *mise-en-scène* a thousand times before, and yet its disposition was wholly new and strange to me. Who *are* these people? Why are they grafted onto a landscape from a wholly other place when they don't seem to belong there? What is the meaning of these various letters, pictures, quotes, and artifacts that surround them? Why do I feel connected and yet curiously displaced? Why are they staring at me?

Much of the strength of a work of art can be attributed to contradictions. This is what provides tension and conflict, what arouses subjective emotional response, keeps you coming back. In the case of musical hybrids, I find it's usually best to let the music wash over you at first and not to dissect it too soon. Later, as you revisit—and you will revisit—you start to try to get below the surface and understand what makes them tick. At the American Academy back in the seventies it seems like every conversation I had with an architect there involved the comparison of architecture with music. It's clear that classical architecture occupies space using hierarchical ranking of compositional elements. Once the larger form is established, the rest is defined by dividing smaller details into metrical units, the rhythms and stresses of which create the surface energy that relates proportionally to the larger whole. We went to visit Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati up in Vicenza to witness this firsthand. But we certainly didn't have to go very far outside the front steps of the Academy building to see it in action. As I

studied the *Triptych* further, I was first stuck by what appeared to be its bilateral symmetry: it is divided down the center. At the same moment it is of course overtly tripartite: after all, it's a triptych. So it is formed perhaps in a kind of musical hemiola—three in the time of two. Brahms uses hemiolas to devastating expressive effect. Whenever there is balance, of course, every little thing that deviates from that order creates tension. I started to see it as a kind of musical sonata allegro form, or ABA. First on the left, mother and daughter staunchly holding forth uprightly in the exposition, then, in the great middle panel, we have the battleground development section, and finally, the recapitulation with its self-portrait of the artist, hands clasped and legs slightly apart. There may even be a narrative transformation from exposition to recapitulation. See the difference with the way the mother and daughter sit in contrast to the way the artist sits. The two windows to the outside world, in the middle panel's development section, contrast the sacred and secular, and stand in precarious balance—as a link connecting these images. The hanging potted plant on the left has wispy leaves under the Madonna's tears, while its balanced counterpart on the right is full-throated under the stern gaze of the patriarch Baudouin de Lannoy. The final cadence is punctuated by the photo of the Madonna and Child echoing the mother and daughter sitting in the exposition; a tiny ancient statue with clasped hands which seems to wink over the shoulder of the artist's own hand-clasped pose.

I ask myself: why did I first read this triptych from left to right? We are culturally conditioned to, certainly; then I recall something that Beethoven does in his massive *Eroica*—something as revolutionary to sonata-allegro form as what Napoleon (to whom the work is ostensibly dedicated) achieved on the battlefields. Smack in the middle of his development section of the first movement, he does what no one had ever done before: he introduces an entirely new theme. It blows our preconditioned expectations to smithereens. While the exposition and development sections of the movement are in E-flat, this theme appears, weirdly and otherworldly in E-minor—a key seriously removed by a number of flats from the tonic center of the work. Dinnerstein places his copper engraving plate in such a position. The effect is galvanizing and striking. The plate is surrounded by engraving tools and laid on the center of the table, so it is prepared. But its central position forces us to prioritize it as a kind

of cupola to a greater building with flanked wings on either side. And it is an anomaly, because it is unique in the painting, like Beethoven's new theme. It is "other" yet part of the historical continuity and flow. It anchors us, brings us to the illusion of certainty, and reminds us of the artist's past as an engraver, just as the painting itself intimates his future.

The left-to-right impulse to view vanishes as we soon try to take the *Triptych* in from all angles because, of course, we can do that with a painting. The disciples of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School tried to invent musical systems which could retrograde or invert sequences of pitches and events, thus subtly manipulating forward motion in time. The early minimalists took cues from African and Balinese polyrhythmic systems, and slowed perceptible time down. Presently, in our digital age, we have the capacity to sample and quantify material in ways that can take this deconstruction to new and mind-bending extremes. Yet no matter how you slice it, music still needs time to exist. Not even John Cage could get around that. But in painting and the plastic arts, time is supplied by you and me. We decide how much time to give it. What a relief not to be stuck in the center aisle of a long row in a huge concert hall during a four-hour Morton Feldman marathon (I do love his music) with no way out. A painting you can just walk away from!

So why didn't I? Because what I could not reconcile pulled me back and back again. What I could not reconcile haunted me; these oddly yet meticulously rendered figures and images, this über-realism which maybe wasn't real at all. The seemingly static surface energized my imagination, and I suddenly found myself diving into the dynamism of the details: all the children's pen drawings, the scribbling, the Renaissance figures, the paintings repainted, the handwritten Wittgenstein quote on a paper fragment which offered more than a clue. The images pinned on a drab wall, sacred and profane, all ages and generations: generations of family, stages of personal life, parents' passports; generations of art and artists, objects as symbols and signs which reflect inward on themselves and cast a hazy light on all which come before and after. A modern religious triptych that glows in the ancient gold of Cimabue, where the glow turns out to be painted wood walls, where the halo over the Madonna turns out to be a potted plant, and religion turns out to be assimilated Brooklyn Jews in post-

Holocaust Germany. The hybridity becomes alive and the painting begins to float on these axes. Time is no longer teleological, but moves in many multiple directions. The line perspective from the receding hills out the windows is three-dimensional space, and suddenly the generations float from my eyes straight to the far horizon and back again in an endless loop. I hear lyrical lines softly singing through. The objects pinned to the wall are in motion, moving through vectors in time and intersecting at random junctions. A mixed polyphonic ghost-chorus, the voices are hocketed, and there are waves of imitative counterpoint—although some of the fifth-species rules may be just a bit bent. The complexity of Dinnerstein's dream vision begins to come into focus for me as the picture itself goes out of focus. The symbols are speaking to each other, hierarchies established; formal tension intertwines with threaded details, my expectations piqued.

The Unanswered Question, as Wittgenstein asks in the pinned background—which of these worlds is *our* world? And the nonanswer is: all of them and none of them. All of these images could be what they are, or they could be something else. There is no one world, no choice to make, because the proof would require rooting in a static certainty. And we can glean from this painting that no such certainty exists.