

PROGRAM NOTES FOR FANTASY III : HOMAGE TO MENDELSSOHN

As in the case of the four hand sonatas, there exist three, the first from somewhere in the late fifties; this one from the Summer of 1992 and the Fantasy II from 1990. I like to compose series of pieces; most composers do because the designs and shape and characters of certain species of pieces draw you back to reconsider and recaste new ideas in familiar settings. Think of the Chopin Ballades, the Rachmaninoff Etudes Tableaux, the Beethoven Bagatelle the Brahms Intermezzi. I consider the fantasy as a piece which has few design features locked in; it is a work which can be in any or many different formal shapes. It has also a quality of brilliance, of taking off into unknown terrain.

Fantasy I : The Pursuers has yet to be played. Fantasy II will be played later this evening. Fantasy II originated as a commission from my wife, Norma, to compose for her a piece which would be brilliant and communicative, e.g. a plea for a new piano piece which she could perform hereabouts and away without finding the polite, glassy, and clearly befuddled response so often a feature of much of my new music in varieties of audiences. Or to put it more bluntly, she wanted an crowd-pleaser-more, as she put it - in the style of my improvisations than of my gritty serious pieces.

It is easy to request; hard to deliver on that sort of commission. First off, I don't compose music designed to shock or baffle or offend audiences; nor do I compose it for a small band of committed specialists. I simply always have composed out of the complex of sensibilities and craft-driven procedures which seemed suitable or interesting or appropriate. So - my first response to my wife was : I'll try but no promises !

All Spring she had been playing the Mendelssohn Rondo Capriccioso one of the splendid warhorses of the Romantic repertory - bright, glossy, a challenge to the fleet-fingered, a trap for the unwary with wily Mendelssohn showing off his cleverness. The slow practice, the absorption stages - the recapturing of thirteen year-old performances and necessary modifications - that echoed through the halls of the Sapp establishment. As I began to think about the new work - this one, Fantasy III - I decided to try the task of infusing my music, as it were, with the spirit of this splendid piece. The Mendelssohn has a pretty clear design; it is a rondo with a fine introduction. It is also capricious as the title suggest.

This procedure is sometimes called parody; and it has been a feature of a number of my compositions. It is frequently used by my contemporaries - Crumb, Rochberg, Schnittke, Joel Hoffman, and the procedure has roots as far back as the fourteenth century. Anyway I thought it would be fun to compose a work in my fantasy tradition with strong references to this particular Mendelssohn work. So - there is a slow introduction [a reminiscence of which occurs near the conclusion of the Fantasy]; there is a borrowing of the key - E with which the rondo proper begins and ends; there is a borrowing of the design - a classic rondo structure; and to some extent there is an adaptation of the differential character of scherzo-like and lyric materials.

Naturally the tunes, harmonies, textures are mine and are rather far removed from the felicities of Mendelssohn !

When I faced the dread moment of presenting my new Fantasy to Norma - I steeled myself for her first reactions. But not quite enough ! She declared that this was emphatically not what she had had in mind; it was another of those hellishly complicated, messy, texturally dense, dissonant things she had come to know so well. I begged her to give the piece a chance; try it out. Happily her first reactions have changed to enthusiasm and to a magisterial interpretation of a piece she has played about eight times to a pleased and excited audience of one kind or another. Goes to show you ! What is the piece - A capricious rondo !