

Inevitable Synchronicities: The Cosmic Counterpoint of Michael Byron's *The Celebration*

THE AUSTERE ROMANTIC

American composer Michael Byron has cultivated a compelling musical style marked by rhythmic complexity, vivacious contrapuntal textures, perpetual variability, and undulating fields of opulent harmony, all of which require extreme virtuosity from the performers. Adopting an “airtight” aesthetic, Byron strives for the highest degree of formal efficiency, where every event of the piece—from the overall shape to the surface details—serves a precise and unique function. Byron has described his music as “unforgiving, intense, very difficult to write, very difficult to perform, and very difficult to listen to,”¹ but there remains an undeniable beauty and sensuality to his challenging scores, which bear such evocative titles as *Book of Horizons*, *Dreamers of Pearl*, and *Awakening at the Inn of the Birds*. Like a nineteenth-century romantic, Byron embraces the imaginative realm of fantasy, seduction, and poetic sentimentality, but he conceives and executes his meticulous work with the rigorous discipline of an uncompromising modernist. “Austerity is very important to me,” Byron admits. “It’s something that elevates music to a special place that’s not part of the world of human affairs, but is separate and distinct.”² According to Byron, the conjoining of classical craftsmanship and romantic mysticism is not a paradox, but a testament to the value of radical eclecticism, which is less of a stylistic label and more of an aesthetic position, an ethical responsibility of artists to remain open to the possibilities of realities not yet dreamed.

Byron was properly introduced to the principles of austerity and radical eclecticism through his studies and friendship with James Tenney, who was his composition teacher at the California Institute of the Arts in the early 1970s. Tenney not only served as a passionate advocate for the music of Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Edgard Varèse, and John Cage at a time when the academy focused almost exclusively on the European mainstream, but he also encouraged his students to recognize their connection to a living tradition of American experimentalism. From a more practical standpoint, Tenney impressed upon Byron the notion that sound is a physical object and he credits Tenney with teaching him how to visualize musical structure, so that virtually the entire piece is composed before the first note hits the paper (in Byron’s case, almost always graph paper before music manuscript). Generally, after mapping the overall form as defined by tempo relationships, Byron constructs and deploys intricate algorithmic processes to determine the availability of various musical parameters (timbre, pitches, durations, dynamics, etc.) at any given moment in the composition. Then, using stochastic procedures, Byron admits a carefully measured and gradually accumulating collection of elements into the music at precisely designated time intervals. Although he has shown a proclivity for unidirectional processes and arch forms, Byron has also shared Tenney’s early fascination with the dynamic uniformity of ergodic structures, where in a texture of constant variability there is statistical equivalence in terms of the probability of how the musical elements are distributed. Regardless of the formal design, constant variation is paramount to Byron; he is adamant that his kaleidoscopic variations are devoid of exact repetition in order to discover “not causal relationships, but meaningful

¹ Michael Byron, interview with Rebecca Stuhlbarg on Santa Cruz public radio KUSP, April 23, 2006. Also see Amy Beal, “Dreaming of Virtuosity,” liner notes, *Dreamers of Pearl* by Michael Byron (New World Records 80679, 2008), compact disc.

² Byron, phone conversation with the author, December 23, 2016.

simultaneities.”³ And since he typically works with expanding chromatic pitch collections and asymmetrical subdivisions of the beat, his generative processes yield an intricate labyrinth of interweaving lines, or what he calls “devilish counterpoint,” all of which is painstakingly notated.

THE COMMISSION AND THE COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

Byron has long been committed to writing virtuosic instrumental music, but with *The Celebration*, a song cycle for baritone and piano quintet, he ventured into unfamiliar territory: he had not previously composed for voice, the primary vehicle for articulating the mystery and wonder of the human condition. The idea for the work sprang from poet Anne Tardos, who is married to Byron. Tardos wrote a poem called “The Pure of Heart” during a concert she attended with singer Tom Buckner, and she gifted it to him as a memento of their friendship as well as of their artistic community of friends. Tardos subsequently asked Buckner if he might enlist Byron to set the poem to music, even though the composer had never before written for voice. The commission posed challenges concerning the relationship between text and music that Byron had not yet confronted, but as he recalls, “instinct and curiosity compelled me to embark on this project”⁴ and he composed his first song for voice and piano. Following the successful premiere of “The Pure of Heart,” Buckner invited Byron and Tardos to extend the work into a song cycle, so she set to work writing three new poems and Byron decided to expand the instrumentation to include a string quartet. Byron initially regarded the song cycle as an antiquated genre, but Tardos’s artistry stimulated his imagination and he quickly recognized points of intersection with his own work. “Anne’s poetry is one of deep feeling, expressed through irregular cadence, spontaneity, and sudden animation,” Byron relates. “Her work recognizes the tonal value of words, in permanent transition. The poems, written for *The Celebration*, oscillate seamlessly between abstraction and narration. They lend themselves perfectly to my direction in music.”⁵

Even though the song cycle was an unfamiliar enterprise for Byron, he relied on structural designs that have been central to his instrumental work, trusting that valuable correspondences between the poetry and music would emerge as a natural result of the compositional process. After deciding that *The Celebration* would be a one-hour piece comprised of four songs and two instrumental interludes, he determined durations and tempos for each section and subsection, then he charted the location of harmonic modulations at relatively equal distances. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of Byron’s score, and the one that tends to command the attention of both the performers and listeners, is the fierce complexity of the non-repeating rhythmic figures, many of which are comprised of irregular subdivisions of the beat, effectively obscuring any regular sense of pulse and meter. To generate the instrumental counterpoint, Byron chose an ergodic system similar to those used in his string quartet *Awakening at the Inn of the Birds* and *Dreamers of Pearl* for piano. “The same processes are in place at any given point in the piece,” Byron explains, “but the structure allows different things to happen. They’re self-propulsive—once set into motion, they just go.”⁶ In order to keep the intricacies of the instrumental counterpoint from upstaging the vocal line, Byron limited the pitch resources in *The Celebration* to

³ Byron, interview with Rebecca Stuhlbarg, April 23, 2006.

⁴ Byron, unpublished program note for *The Celebration*, 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Byron, phone conversation with the author, December 23, 2016.

pentatonic and diatonic collections, which yield sensuous fields of harmonic stasis. These fields not only provide suitable space for the declamation of the text, but they also temper the rhythmic and contrapuntal complexity of the instrumental texture. “As soon as you pass a certain threshold of perceptual complexity in what you’re listening to,” states Byron, “there’s a point when the sparkling clarity and transparency becomes clouded. It loses that crystal quality that is absolutely essential to hear the poetry.”⁷ In order to retain his idiosyncratic style of counterpoint without clouding the perceptual space necessary to understand the words, he enshrouded the vocal part with what he calls a “beautiful blanket” of pitches.

It was only after completing the instrumental parts that Byron turned to the vocal line. Although he had never before set text to music, he had long been an avid reader of poetry and possesses a great literary knowledge, so he was sensitive about preserving the integrity of Tardos’s work. At the same time, *The Celebration* is not a situation where the music deliberately depicts or reinforces the poetic images. “I wanted to create a work where the text and music could live together without conflict,” says Byron. “In other words, each has its own life, but intimately share a life together.”⁸ It was imperative to Byron that the poem maintain a clear and exacting presence, that all the words be heard and that the meaning would not be subject to excessive reinterpretation through the music. From a structural perspective, Byron basically approached the poetry as if it was any other parameter that functions as an equal participant in his compositional framework. Before placing the text into the established musical structure, he conducted a laborious word and phrase count of each poem to determine the arithmetic distribution of those units, which appear in the score at roughly even intervals. Although this calculating method produced the unexpected synchronicities between the vocal and instrumental lines that he had intended, Byron certainly did not ignore the content of the poem when making musical decisions, which is evident in two notable ways. First, he read through the text very carefully, and intuitively determined whether the meaning of any given phrase would be best clarified through one of three distinct modes of vocal delivery—rhythmic speaking (*Sprechstimme*), chant-like incantation, or lyrical singing—and the melody, which was not subject to any precompositional system, was entirely written as heard by Byron. Second, even though he constructed elaborate systems to determine the correspondence between the instruments and the voice as independent entities, he reserved the right to make slight modifications to accommodate specific passages in the text. “When I saw an extraordinary line,” Byron admits, “there were multiple times where I couldn’t resist changing the point of modulation.”⁹ In short, Byron ensured the contrapuntal integrity of the musical structure while also reserving “all the action, drama, and burst of personality” for the voice.¹⁰

THE CELEBRATION

Consisting of four songs and two instrumental interludes, *The Celebration* explores the ambiguity, the disorientation, and ultimately the joyful enigma of existing in a reality that undergoes endless reinvention. The song cycle is essentially cast in a four-movement structure that reflects the form of a classical chamber sonata: Allegro (“Philomel’s Song”), Andante (“One”), Allegro in lower key (“Beginningless”), and Finale (“The Pure of Heart”), with the addition of two instrumental

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Byron, email correspondence with the author, August 21, 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

interludes, “so,” as Byron puts it, “we could all just breathe between these rigorous songs.”¹¹

The first song in the cycle, “Philomel’s Song,” is a reference to the macabre Greek myth of the abused woman who turns into a nightingale. The poem, which begins in recognition of a process already underway, reflects the vague nature of continuous change (“the uncertainty of the uncertainty, and then the uncertainty”) and transgenerational dialogue (“Millions of ancestors inhabit me, arguing among themselves”), in which all realities are subject to perpetual transformation (“Distortion is all there is”). The vivacious rhythmic activity of Byron’s contrapuntal texture is softened by the harmonic stasis in a pentatonic mode. After inhabiting a harmonic region for some time, the ensemble shifts suddenly to another pentatonic collection, providing remarkable drama to the poetry. (Note, for example, the breathtaking harmonic shift that coincides with the text “by entering this other existence.”) There are seven such modulations, which articulate the structure of the movement at regular intervals of time. The climax, as understated as it is, comes on the text “Reality is continually being recreated by various other realities,” which returns to the pentatonic collection from the opening of the movement and is punctuated by the only gentle surge in dynamics.

For Interlude I, the strings provide a brief instrumental respite between songs without the voice or piano. The slow and quiet murmuring suggests a pentatonic hymn, the individual parts of which have been metrically offset from one another, and the unequal subdivisions across the barlines create gentle ripples of what Debussy called the “interminable flow” of time.

The poem “One” is a Zen-like meditation of epic inclusivity, incorporating both lofty and mundane matter, in both playful and profound manner, acknowledging that it is “all part of the puzzle.” As if posing an existential koan, Tardos reflects on the act of reflection (“the brain thinking about the brain”) in order to dissolve the notion of the self into “the basic oneness of the universe.” Although this song is about the same tempo as “Philomel’s Song,” there are initially more sustained tones and the voice and instruments encompass a narrower range (especially the vocal line, which has the quality of a chant-like recitation), giving the impression of a slower rate of time. Also, instead of limiting pitches to a pentatonic collection, Byron draws from a full diatonic aggregate. Perhaps most significantly, there is only one harmonic modulation—from B major to F# minor—that occurs directly in the middle of the song (on the text “Existence is assured”), marking a symmetrical design that calls to mind the yin-yang duality.

As with the first interlude, Interlude II features the strings alone in a pentatonic hymn, but unlike Interlude I, this one features a tertiary harmonic shift in the middle, perhaps echoing the structure of the preceding song. Also, while staggered counterpoint still pervades this interlude, there is more evidence of homorhythmicity among the parts, especially after the modulation, hinting at the possibility of a slight resolve.

In the poem “Beginningless,” Tardos explores the dizzying infinitude of the human experience, “The ride of a lifetime,” in which creativity of thought consists of “transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the sense and experience.” It is our prerogative while we are alive to interpret reality as we wish, to write our own stories, with the understanding that “Our inventions tend to be arbitrary.” As living beings, we are thrust into the middle of an ongoing swirl of “unexpected chemistry,” and as Tardos concludes, “I don’t know any better point to start from.” Byron’s musical setting initially features a tight configuration of cellular

¹¹ Byron, phone conversation with the author, December 23, 2016.

permutations in the instrumental parts that gradually expand into more varied pitch and rhythmic resources. As in “Philomel’s Song,” there are several harmonic modulations throughout “Beginningless” (the modulation surrounding the text “The ride of a lifetime” is especially exhilarating) and the most intense rhythmic activity appropriately occurs during the poetic segment concerning “An increasing sense of urgency, inexplicable in light of a conscious attempt at slowing down.” This song also features a lyrical climax in the form of an ascending vocal line on the phrase “Who am I, and what do I mean by who am I?” which is marked in the score as “wondrously strong”—the only expressive instruction in the manuscript.

“The Pure of Heart,” the poem that sparked the entire song cycle, is Tardos’s tribute to her partnership with the late poet Jackson Mac Low. Derived from Kierkegaard’s essay “Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing,” the poem focuses on language as a vehicle for identity formation and transformation in a constantly changing world. Tardos acknowledges “The choppiness of communication/The fragmentedness/The infinitely increasing distance between everything and everything else,” but celebrates the spheres of human relationships as “transparent and interpenetrating—not static shells but concentric ripples traveling/simultaneously out from and in toward each center.” “Reality,” she poses, “is the contextualizing of random information.” In the context of the previous movements of this work, the most conspicuous aspect of Byron’s setting of this song is his choice of pitches. Instead of employing pentatonicism, Byron introduces the leading tone for the first time, creating a hexatonic collection that implies extended tertian harmony, revealing a lush new sound world that is characterized by a stronger sense of pitch centrality, harmonic focus, and arrival. Also, while the piano remains independent, there are more points of rhythmic and harmonic convergence among the strings and voice, including unison-octaves at the key changes. The several harmonic modulations continue to give dramatic weight to changes in the poetic sentiments, including an arresting shift on the text “His life ended/Whichever god he was/Sang before the sea and lands,” which identifies death as one of the most profound of human transformations. To reinforce the powerful image of expiration, Byron issues a precise sequence of reduced tempo markings across the entire song, which amounts to a large-scale deceleration, an inexorable unwinding of time.

INEVITABLE SYNCHRONICITIES

As Tardos’s poetry and Byron’s music affirm, everything is in a constant state of change and the mere existence of one entity ultimately shapes the transformation of every other: “A full system scan,” Tardos writes, reveals “the basic oneness of the universe.” Just as Byron creates a new context for Tardos’s poetry, so does the presence of the poetic voice transform Byron’s music. The instrumental lines, for example, begin to assume an intensely lyrical guise as they anticipate, echo, mirror, and contrast the vocal line, and the listener might be persuaded to reimagine the contrapuntal and rhythmic complexity as a fragmented chorale of simple melodies, a community of cosmic voices that have been gently jostled into interconnected orbits. The unexpected divergence and convergence of the vocal and instrumental lines produce what Byron calls “inevitable synchronicities,” that mysterious circumstance of a multitude of voices immersed in eternal dialogue. “It’s not about complexity,” Byron insists, “it’s about multiplicity,”¹² the dynamic co-existence of independent celestial bodies within a universal spectrum of possibilities. With *The Celebration*, Byron and Tardos provide a rich opportunity for us to acknowledge and

¹² Ibid.

celebrate the divine counterpoint between voice and instruments, poetry and music, individual and humanity.

—Eric Smigel

Eric Smigel is Associate Professor of Music and coordinator of the musicology program at San Diego State University. He has published numerous articles on topics concerning American experimental music and is currently under contract with the University of Illinois Press to write the first historical biography of composer James Tenney.

Michael Byron was born in 1953 in Chicago, Illinois. He attended the newly opened California Institute of the Arts, where he studied with James Tenney. Byron's compositional trajectory was shaped specifically by his association with the early experiments at CalArts. At around that time he met Peter Garland and Harold Budd (two lifelong musical friends), and soon after, Lou Harrison, Robert Ashley, Dane Rudhyar, and others active in the West Coast new-music scene.

In June 1973, Byron left CalArts and moved to Toronto, Ontario. He lived in the small town of Maple, where he, composer David Rosenboom, filmmaker George Manupelli, and visual artist Jackie Humbert founded the multidisciplinary performance art group, Maple Sugar. In 1978, with encouragement from Lou Harrison, he moved to New York City. His friend, Phillip Corner, introduced him to composers in Manhattan's downtown music world. He was frequently engaged as a copyist and editor on various projects for La Monte Young, Robert Ashley, Lukas Foss, and others. He became involved with new ventures like The Kitchen, where, in 1980, his chamber piece *Tidal* was premiered, conducted by Julius Eastman. *Tidal* was originally issued as an LP on Glenn Branca's Neutral Records and later re-released on Cold Blue Records.

Byron was editor and publisher of the acclaimed anthologies, *Pieces*, and served as editor of *The Journal of Experimental Aesthetics*. His music has been released on Cold Blue Music, Meridian Records, Poon Village Records, Neutral Records, Tellus, Koch Records, and New World Records. Byron lives with his wife, the poet Anne Tardos, in New York City.

For decades, baritone **Thomas Buckner** has dedicated himself to the promotion and performance of new and improvised music, collaborating with a host of new-music luminaries, including Robert Ashley, Noah Creshevsky, Tom Hamilton, Earl Howard, Matthias Kaul, Leroy Jenkins, Bun Ching Lam, Annea Lockwood, Roscoe Mitchell, Phill Niblock, Wadada Leo Smith, Chinariy Ung, Christian Wolff and many others.

Buckner has appeared at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the Herbst Theatre, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Berlin Spring Festival, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, the Prague Spring Festival, and the Angelica Festival in Bologna. He is featured on over fifty recordings, including six solo albums, the most recent being *New Music for Baritone & Chamber Ensemble*, which includes works by Annea Lockwood, Tania León, and Petr Kotik. Buckner also appears on the newly released CD/DVD *Kirili et le Nymphéas (Hommage à Monet)*, filmed at the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris, which hosts the Monet's celebrated *Water Lilies* murals. For the past twenty-five years Thomas Buckner has curated the Interpretations series in New York City, and continues to produce recordings on the Mutable Music label, introducing current artists and repertoire, as well as presenting important historic material, previously unavailable in CD format.

The **FLUX Quartet** has performed to rave reviews in venues worldwide, including the Tate Modern with BBC Radio3, Park Avenue Armory, Kennedy Center, Mount Tremper Arts, EMPAC, Walker Art Center, as well as international festivals in Australia, Europe, and Asia. The group's discography includes recordings on Cantaloupe, Innova, and Tzadik, in addition to two acclaimed releases on Mode encompassing Morton Feldman's full catalogue of string quartet works. Strongly influenced by the "anything-goes" philosophy of the Fluxus art movement, violinist Tom Chiu founded FLUX in the late 90s. The quartet has since cultivated an uncompromising repertoire that combines late twentieth-century iconoclasts like Nancarrow, Scelsi, and Ligeti with today's pioneers, including David First, Oliver Lake, Alvin Lucier, Michael Schumacher, Wadada Leo Smith, Matthew Welch and others. As part of its mission to support future visionaries, FLUX has been awarded grants from the American Composers Forum, the Aaron Copland Fund, Meet The Composer, New Music USA, and Chamber Music America. The group also pursues interdisciplinary projects, and has created new works with genre-transcending artists including choreographer Pam Tanowitz, balloonist Judy Dunaway, digital artists OpenEnded Group, and visual artist Matthew Barney.

Pianist **Joseph Kubera** has been a leading interpreter of contemporary music for more than three decades. Recent activities include performances at New York's Tectonics Festival, the John Cage 100th birthday celebrations in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, and a TV production for Swiss RSI Television. Over the years he has worked closely with such composers as Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, and Robert Ashley. A major Cage interpreter, he has made definitive Cage recordings and toured widely with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Mr. Kubera has worked with numerous New York ensembles and has been awarded grants through the NEA and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

Anne Tardos, French-born American poet, is the author of ten books of poetry and several multimedia performance works. Among her recent books of poetry are *I Am You* (BlazeVox, 2016), *NINE* (BlazeVOX, 2015), *Both Poems* (Roof, 2011), *I Am You* (Salt, 2008), and *The Dik-dik's Solitude* (Granary, 2003). She is the editor of Jackson Mac Low's *The Complete Light Poems* (Chax, 2015), *154 Forties* (Counterpath, 2012), and *Thing of Beauty* (California, 2008). A Fellow in Poetry from the New York Foundation for the Arts, Tardos lives in New York.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Awakening at the Inn of the Birds. Cold Blue CB 0012.

Book of Horizons. New World Records 80745-2.

Dreamers of Pearl. New World Records 80679-2.

Elegant Detours. Included on *Marty Walker: Dancing on Water*. Cold Blue CB 5.

In the Village of Hope. Cold Blue CB 0043.

Marimbas in the Dorian Mode. Included on *Cold Blue*. Cold Blue CB 8.

Music of Nights Without Moon or Pearl. Cold Blue CB 0002.

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Editing and engineering assistant: Jeanne Velonis

Recorded June 1–2, 2016, at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Cover Photograph by Andy Futreal. Used by permission
Design: Jim Fox

The Celebration is published by the composer.

Piano by Steinway & Sons

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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MICHAEL BYRON (b. 1953)

THE CELEBRATION

Poems by Anne Tardos

Thomas Buckner, baritone; Joseph Kubera, piano; FLUX Quartet

80787-2

The Celebration (2013) 54:07

for baritone and piano quintet

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2. Interlude I 2:12
3. II. One 12:08
4. Interlude II 2:00
5. III. Beginningless 12:12
6. IV. The Pure of Heart 13:11