

Cuong Vu: Porch Music for viola and trumpet (2015)

Program Notes:

For a few months leading up to writing this duo piece for Melia, I had spent a significant amount of time anxiously contemplating the challenges of coming up with a piece that would live up to the expectations of being commissioned by my friend, colleague and virtuosic violist that she is. My intention was that the piece would not only feature the coalescing characteristics of our instruments that resonate with me, but more so our musical personalities and overlapping musical experiences and what that could encompass. We had done some work together in Melia's project with two other amazing artists, violinist Michael Lim and drummer Ted Poor, in a context rooted in free improvisation. The advantage of integrating improvisation into the piece and using the musical data that we accumulated and internalized in that experience became a necessity and impetus.

While this realization provided momentary relief, the challenge of writing the piece continued to be perplexing due to the litany of things that I didn't want the piece to be nor how it would be referenced by the listener. Shoot me if the listener would think of it as a classical piece, a jazz piece or an avant-garde piece. I just want it to be simply heard as a Melia piece written by Cuong. Being handcuffed by my idea of what the original project theme should mean, the process of committing pencil to paper, so to speak, was difficult and didn't begin until the project transformed to include the idea of folk songs. This is territory that I'd never contemplated for my musical output but provided an area to work within that was still connected to Melia's project theme.

With this metaphoric green light, I decided to write my own version of a folk song that would be the generative germ for the piece. My "song" drew from the kinds of folk songs that one might find Charles Ives's referencing in his incredible body of works. Songs such as "Oh Shenandoah" or folk songs that were influenced by "Amazing Grace" along with the general characteristics of American folk songs from the 1950's such as "500 Miles" and "Blowing' in the Wind" have permeated our collective consciousness whether we're fans of that music or not. Melodically and harmonically, this seemed a perfect overlapping starting point for me to use in bringing our different vocabularies together for Melia and me, since we are after all, a part of that collective consciousness.

Having this folky, "fiddle music" type of sound in my ear as I wrote the song, it generated harmonies built on the interval of the 5th with suspended 2nds or 4ths (inversions of each other). The song's inherent harmonies further generated a sequence of chords that provided a harmonic opening that helped me to obscure the two initial presentations of its melodic theme, which then set up the environment for the first improvisation featuring Melia. These chords then serve as a transition into a second improvisation, featuring myself over Melia's accompanimental approach and interjections/declarations. This second improvisation then transitions into the simply stated song for the ending.

The name of the piece comes from my description of two musical approaches. The first is in playing with intonation to create a slightly unstable, “warble-y” feeling and character for the overall piece. The second is for the disjunctive feeling for the second improvisation. My description to Melia was to play in a way that would conjure up images of two old timers sitting on their back porch on the prairie, back in the day, reminiscing about their past while throwing back a heavy dose of whiskey.

I’m relieved to know that Melia really likes the piece!

—Cuong Vu