

# Large Stage Live!



If it's a live performance, whether music, theatre, dance, or opera, and I attend it, I review it here. In the age of COVID-19, this description obviously includes live-streamed events as well. Occasionally, I will also review audio or video recordings of the arts which have attracted my interest.

Sunday, 25 April 2021

## Ludwig and Beyond Part II: The Diversity of Inspiration

The Cheng<sup>2</sup>Duo at last have been able, on Saturday night, to complete the premiere of their ambitious "Ludwig and Beyond" project with a recorded video performance of the remaining works in the programme. Despite the heartbreaking delays and multiple cancellations imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this splendid gift to the world of music for the Beethoven anniversary year of 2020 has finally reached its belated conclusion.

We heard the first instalment in September, with the Beethoven *Cello Sonatas #s 1, 4, and 5*, and the world premiere of Paul Wiancko's *Sonata # 1: Shifting Baselines*. If you wish, you can read my review of that concert at this link:

### Ludwig and Beyond Part I: Beethoven Meets a Stunning World Premiere

Now comes the second part of the project, comprising the *Cello Sonatas #s 2 & 3*, alongside two more commissioned works, from Canadian composers, inspired by those sonatas: Samy Moussa's *Ring* and Dinuk Wijeratne's *Portrait of the Imaginary Sibling*.

This performance, sponsored by the Ottawa Chamberfest, had to be recorded without an audience (due to pandemic restrictions) in Montreal, Quebec, in the Salle Bourgie of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, a venue in which I had heard the Cheng<sup>2</sup>Duo in a live concert of French music last fall.

In an age when so much music is assembled out of so many effects or episodic sounds presented in apparently random sequence, it's nothing less than startling to find a composer structuring an entire piece around the classical textbook procedure of the circle of fifths. Yet that is what Moussa has done in *Ring*.

His point of inspiration was the firm sense of structural completeness which he sensed in Beethoven's *Cello Sonata # 2*.



Each section of the score is pervaded and supported by that critical harmonic process. This is not to say that it's immediately apparent at the outset, but over the course of the work the listener can hear that this circle is indeed the organizing principle at work -- hence the title.

While Bryan Cheng stated in his pre-performance remarks that the complete work has ten sections, to this listener at least it came across as four distinct portions delineated by the moods of the music. The opening struck the ear as a series of random, jagged notes or fragments scattered all over the cello's range. But then, the piano took up an imitative development of the cello's opening while the cello outlined the harmonies in energetic tremolando, the circle of fifths declared itself, and the whole piece began to take shape.

A section of densely harmonized piano writing with sustained, striving melodic work in the cello then led into a quieter, slower passage with both instruments high in their registers. In the next portion, staccato and pizzicato writing pushed out to the extreme highs and lows of each instrument added variety to the texture, with the sound again gradually turning more melodic.

In the final pages, a ponderous, bass-heavy tread (suggestive of a march) propelled the music forward while the cello, and ultimately the piano as well, elaborated with truly furious passagework -- all leading to an abrupt yet timely ending on a staccato tonic chord as the circle was completed again. Moussa's *Ring* is a splendid example of music that finds completely new ground to tread while working within more traditional frames of reference. A rewarding piece indeed, in this world premiere performance.

Dinuk Wijeratne's *Portrait of the Imaginary Sibling* inhabited a rather different sound world, but again made excellent use of a traditional musical resource -- the *ostinato*. Of all the commissioned works in *Ludwig and Beyond*, this was the one that made the most overt use of a direct quote from Beethoven -- the jagged off-beat rhythm of the scherzo in *Sonata # 3*, which functioned as a bass *ostinato* throughout much of the work's main body.

Wijeratne also gave more than a slight nod to the classical music traditions of the Indian subcontinent, with much writing for the cello and piano evoking the sounds of the Indian *sarangi* and *tabla*.

The title refers to an imaginary sibling of the Chengs, but from the tone of the music I sensed not so much a kinship with Bryan and Silvie Cheng as the presence of an imaginary sibling of Beethoven himself.

In the very opening pages, Wijeratne has the pianist do some direct strumming and thrumming on the strings of the instrument, while the cello plays a wandering line that, together with the piano part, immediately evokes the distinctive harmonies and



sounds of Indian music.

But soon, the tempo accelerates, and the wandering explorations of the opening are pushed aside by a furiously energetic scherzo, in which the ostinato drawn from Beethoven's rhythm sets both the pace and the ruling force of the music. Against that background, the abrupt eruptions and tart comments from both piano and cello fill in the portrait of a kindred soul to Beethoven, prone to sudden explosions of anger and fierce energy.

In time the music quietens a bit, and becomes more fragmentary for a time, until a brief and furious explosion of energy leads to an abrupt fortissimo conclusion. This piece stands in a completely different sound world from Moussa's work, but proves equally intriguing and rewarding for repeated listening.

Throughout both pieces, the Chengs demonstrated considerable aplomb in meeting the unusual demands of the composers for unique sounds and rhythms, and for building structure in certain key passages out of the sketch-like, fragmentary writing.

In the two Beethoven sonatas, the Chengs obviously gave a great deal of thought to the expressive possibilities in Beethoven's writing for both instruments, from the crisp, lightning-fast *staccato* and *pizzicato* to the denser, fuller textures for piano, and the broader, more sweeping melodies for cello.

In *Sonata # 2*, the work was bookended by the solemn, quasi-religious tone of the slow opening, and the smiling, playful account of the finale, bouncing joyfully along.

There was a truly symphonic breadth and sweep in the first movement of *Sonata # 3*, while the edgy syncopations of the scherzo remained light-hearted even at their crispest and most clear-cut. The slow movement found the Chengs giving full measure to the composer's call for *cantabile*. The *allegro* finale evoked for me nothing so much as Mendelssohn, with a lightness and sparkle so often found in that later composer's works and a spectacularly grand buildup to the final coda.

Plenty of musicians had the idea of presenting cycles of the master's work as part of the Beethoven anniversary year. The Cheng<sup>2</sup>Duo have gone much further, enriching the cello-piano repertoire with three major new works, each one a great success on its own very different ground, and each one absolutely deserving frequent rehearing.