

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: *Matthias Pintscher*

Thursday, October 21, 8:00PM

“My music places its trust in the power of the poetic.... I view my music as an ‘imaginary theater’ full of mysteries and secrets, always rediscovering and redefining its own sensibility. It brings forth soundscapes into which the listener can plunge, unleashing vivid pictorial associations and turning into a mirror-image of faded realities.” (Matthias Pintscher)

This vividness but also impalpability, this sense of listening in to something that is rapturous but not fully discoverable—and the resources of imagination and craft required to make that happen—emerged in Pintscher’s music early on, nearly 20 years ago, and his body of work is by now extensive. There is a Pintscher world, which has visited this city now and then. Last season alone there were several performances at Lincoln Center, including the world premiere by the New York Philharmonic of songs from Solomon’s garden, with Thomas Hampson as soloist. Tonight’s concert takes us further.

Pintscher was born in 1971 in the small town of Marl, in north-west Germany, not far from Dortmund and Gelsenkirchen. He grew up playing the violin, and began to conduct and compose when he was in his teens; two symphonies and two string quartets date from this time. Before college, he spent a year in London, working for the BBC and Boosey & Hawkes. Then came his professional training, at the conservatories in Detmold and Düsseldorf. While he was still a student, Hans Werner Henze took an interest in him, and helped him get a start. Soon he was winning important prizes and meeting other major figures who offered advice and support: Peter Eötvös, Helmut Lachenmann, Pierre Boulez. In 1997 he had a performance at the Salzburg Festival (Five Orchestral Pieces, conducted by Kent Nagano), and the next year his opera *Thomas Chatterton* received its premiere, in Dresden. The year after that came his *Hérodiade-Fragmente*, setting lines by Mallarmé for soprano and orchestra, a work sung for the first time by Christine Schäfer with the Berlin Philharmonic under Claudio Abbado. This lustrous score has been frequently performed since, notably at Carnegie Hall six years ago under Christoph Eschenbach, with Claudia Barainsky, who has recorded it twice, once with the same conductor.

In the last 10 years Pintscher has fulfilled commissions not only from the New York Philharmonic but also from the Cleveland Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony (*Osiris*, conducted by Boulez in 2008). In addition, he has written concertos for Frank Peter Zimmermann (*en sourdine*, 2002), Truls Mørk (*Reflections on Narcissus*, 2004-5), and Emanuel Pahud (*Transir*, 2005-6). Furthermore, a longstanding fascination with Rimbaud—the poet and the work—culminated in his second opera, *L’Espace dernier*, which had its first performance at the Opéra Bastille in Paris in 2004. Besides all these large-scale works have come others for smaller combinations, including a series of delicate yet powerful *Studies for Treatise on the Veil* for between one and four string players (2007-9), referring to a project of Cy Twombly’s—not to mention the pieces on tonight’s program, most of which are recent.

The composer moved to the city in 2008 and teaches at New York University. Further information can be found on his website (www.matthiaspintscher) as well as on that of his publisher, Bärenreiter.

on a clear day (2004)

As we will hear, Pintscher’s music has a lot to do with subtleties of intonation and color, which would seem to rule out the piano. Indeed, this eight-minute piece, written in 2004 for Mitsuko Uchida, represents his entire output of solo piano music since his student years, whereas he has composed a lot for string instruments as soloists or in small groups. However, as appears right at the start, the piano

does turn out to have resources for Pintscherian refinement, its first sound being a harmonic produced by striking a bass key while stopping the string with a finger of the other hand. The resulting tone, the E-flat above middle C, is then played normally, and for a time remains central to the texture of passing clouds; the marking is “evenly floating and swaying.” Eventually, the clouds move on higher, though a few sound from the bass, until there arrives a sequence of arpeggios rippling up to a high A, which gives the music a new, kind-of-upward center of gravitation. The final sounds, “dissolving gradually,” include the original E \flat reappearing near the end.

Un despertar (2008)

Cautiously yet with focused intent, Pintscher here treads back into a genre that had been almost abandoned by progressive composers for decades: the song with piano accompaniment. There was a double prompt. The piece was commissioned for the 2008 Ruhr Piano Festival, and the text Pintscher chose, a poem by Octavio Paz, seemed to invite him into a world of defamiliarized familiarity—“the time of these hours is not time”—where an altogether standard situation, that of a singer standing by a piano, could give rise to a strangeness that may be more real than everyday reality. Here the dream is not an illusion but, as the title puts it, “an awakening.”

As in other vocal works by Pintscher, the instrumental component provides the voice with a shadow-mirror. The singer enters in a low register, though his long, somber but sometimes brilliantly decorated melody ranges widely, as the words go on to explore the revealed clarity of night vision. The piano writing, too, favors the lower part of the instrument, which can answer, enfold, and reflect the voice—except in the climactic middle part of the song, where the answering, enfolding, and reflecting come in a different way. Yet also, though the two, voice and instrument, are wanderers in the same darkness, their paths are their own.

a twilight's song (1997)

While Octavio Paz is a relatively new adventure for the composer, E. E. Cummings, like Rimbaud, has been with him since his late teens, and probably for similar reasons: the disrupted syntax, the often startling imagery. He planned to set a Cummings poem for baritone in his third string quartet, begun when he was a student, and in 2000 he put together a Cummings cycle for soprano and piano, *Songs and Snow Pictures*. The present piece came three years earlier, and sets a single poem for soprano with a seven-piece ensemble: two low strings (viola and cello) and two low woodwinds (bass flute and bass clarinet, both also playing crotales) with harp, piano, and percussion. This is just a slight variant on the *Pierrot-lunaire*-quintet-plus-percussion setup used by very many composers in the past few decades, but it sounds quite special with Pintscher, thanks to the low register, the often strange and whispered sonorities, and the enmeshing of different instrumental voices, so that we may often not be quite sure what we are hearing. Shapes, textures, and colors all tend to fold into one another at twilight, and that is what happens here on an aural level. By the way, the title is Pintscher's, not the poet's (for, as usual, Cummings did not supply one); but there is “dusk” in the text. There is also “dawn,” this being a poem in two parts—two mirroring parts, one might say, with the image of the mirror at the center.

That image is crucial. Two years later, in *Hérodiade-Fragmente*, Pintscher was to contemplate a woman, Herodias, contemplating herself in a mirror. Here the figure reflecting is the poet, or the persona he makes speak this poem: “in the mirror I see a frail man dreaming dreams.” Transferred into song, the mirror is the ensemble, which now and then embraces the singer in a common harmony, or throws back a distorted likeness, or reverberates a sung tone. Writing of *Hérodiade-Fragmente*, Pintscher has remarked that the soprano enters “an acoustically mobile, variable space.” And he goes on: “The singer sends things out like an echo-locator, and attempts thereby to grasp this space, as well as to define her particular relationship to the abstraction as a lost individual.” It is the same here.

sonic eclipse (2010)

I. celestial object I

II. celestial object II

III. occultation

The principle behind this work in three parts, or set of three works, is quite simple. Two pieces are presented, featuring different solo instruments: trumpet and horn respectively. Then the two are overlapped. Following the composer's astronomical metaphor, they are two celestial objects that pass one another in an eclipse or occultation (i.e., an eclipse in which one object appears much larger than the other, as when the moon occults Venus). Celestial Object I and Celestial Object II, both written in 2009, came about through Pintscher's residency with the Berlin Philharmonic's Scharoun Ensemble. Occultation was composed earlier this year, for Klangforum Wien to play at the festival of new chamber music in Witten. The three pieces—scored for a fairly standard lineup of 16 players, including the soloists, and each lasting about 20 minutes—are being played together for the first time tonight.

As Pintscher has pointed out, the two solo instruments, though both members of the brass family, are dissimilar in how they sound and in how they are played, and the contrast led him to take them in opposed directions. The trumpet in Celestial Object I takes some time to emerge from a shadow world of almost toneless playing, of quiet colored noises, whereas the horn in Celestial Object II is right away a singer—and it sings a phrase, too, not long into Celestial Object I. What provokes the trumpet to sing in Celestial Object I is the possibility of a duet with the English horn, one passage among many that shows how the solo instruments in *sonic eclipse*, as much as the soprano in a twilight's song, are confronted by images of themselves in the ensemble, a mirror into which they sometimes dissolve. Around halfway through Celestial Object I, the music starts to settle around a middle-register E \flat (the same note that opened on a clear day), and from here the trumpet becomes generally more melodious, if in its own brilliant vein, often wheeling up to attack high notes repeatedly. After one such bravura roulade, it steps aside to let the horn look forward to Celestial Object II.

The process in the early part of this second piece is almost the reverse of what happened in the first. Beginning in song, the horn is partly sustained and partly challenged by the other players, among whom the trumpet at this point is just part of the ensemble. Then, after a cadenza-like passage, the horn enters what had been the trumpet's nocturnal atmosphere, with soft noises, fluttering-tonguing, and stopped tones. Eventually it picks up a cue the trumpet has been proposing intermittently almost from the start, the D just below the E \flat heard at a similar juncture in Celestial Object I, and it returns to melodic playing around this note, which the strings go on insisting upon. Perhaps it is their obstinacy that forces the horn back into shadow sounds and then into silence, but there comes a point where it takes possession of the omnipresent note, restores melody again, and carries the piece to its conclusion.

Occultation starts out from where Celestial Object II ended, and the vibrating middle D is there pretty much throughout the first half of the piece, where both instruments are in trumpet territory: nearly toneless flurries, tremolos, flutter-tonguing, stopped and muted sounds. There comes a move to a quite different texture, where the whole ensemble plays as one, but this does not last long before the bass clarinet moves forward for a cadenza. From here, unanimity is lost, but this is where the two soloists undertake to sing together, which they continue to do until the work's end.

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