

Ensemble Offspring

Božidar Kos – composer profile

CELEBRATING 70 YEARS

Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Music Workshop, 8pm Sunday 4th July, 2004

Program

Božidar Kos – *Catena*, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, percussion & piano (1985)
Damien Ricketson – *Trace Elements*, flute, clarinet, violin & cello (2003 Australian premiere)
Božidar Kos – *Catena 2*, flute, clarinet, string trio & piano (1992)
Božidar Kos – *Kolo*, solo piano (1984)
Michael Finnissy – *Springtime*, flute, clarinet, violin, cello & piano (2001 world premiere)
Matthew Bieniek – *String Trio* (2003)
Božidar Kos – *Fatamorgana*, flute, clarinet, violin, cello & percussion (2004 world premiere)

Performers

Roland Peelman (conductor)
Katarina Kroslovakova (solo piano)
Sophie Cole, Thomas Talmacs (violin)
James Eccles (viola)
Geoffrey Gartner (cello)
Kathleen Gallagher (flute)
Jason Noble & Diana Springford (clarinet)
Jeremy Barnett (percussion)

Božidar Kos: A Profile

At first glance, Božidar Kos' music and career present something of a paradox: if the fact that he spent many years as a jazz musician is considered alongside his music's rich and appealing colours, we might be led to expect a free-spirited, even romantic attitude to creation. But his conversation, teaching and writings attest otherwise, with emphasis placed squarely on technical issues such as organisation and structure.

With respect to this, his account of his interest in the work of the composer Pierre Boulez is telling. Kos says that it was Boulez's synthesis of "two strains: German intellectual approach to structure and French sensitivity to sound, that is tone colour, texture, and so on" that most impressed him. So whilst it's possible to hear Kos' own compositions as evocative and expressive, at the same time his attention to structure, to harmonic organisation, and his fine craftsman's ear for nuanced instrumental lines and relationships have produced intricate and detailed musical worlds.

Kos himself has not made public pronouncements as to how we are to interpret these strains in his own work. His public utterances have generally been free of the aesthetic and sociological positioning that characterise the statements of many other contemporary composers. What does, however, come across repeatedly from people who have had personal contact with him is a respect for the seriousness with which he approaches musical activity. Such seriousness brings to mind a European, particularly a German conception of art, yet without the philosophising that often goes with it. But in Kos' case seriousness has not meant dryness or humourlessness – in his time teaching in Sydney the Conservatorium corridors often resonated with his gruff chuckle – rather an emphasis on craftsmanship as well as the responsibility of the composer to think carefully about all the decisions made in the work.

Origins

Kos' compositional language bears traces of both the musical experiences of his youth and early adulthood, as well as, naturally, his own musical preferences. Born in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, he gained experience as a classical instrumentalist (piano and cello), after which he formed small jazz ensembles, a big-band and played in a Latin American group from Buenos Aires. With one notable exception, the concerto *Crosswinds* for jazz trumpet, alto saxophone and orchestra (1993), Kos has not revisited the sounds of jazz in his compositions, but performing in these groups did leave a mark on other aspects of his work. Firstly, in his dissatisfaction with the sense of stasis in many of the compositions of the last 50 or so years, and his consequent determination to achieve a strong forward progression in his own music. And secondly, in the actual act of composition: after conceiving of the structures and harmonic processes mentioned above (calculated to give specific heard results), he then works intuitively and very freely with the pitches and parameters he has limited himself to, much as a jazz improviser works with chord progressions.

Although Kos did not perform Eastern European folk musics himself, his years spent in the region gave him a taste for asymmetrical rhythms (for example, counting 2 + 3, rather than 2 + 2 as is more common in Western European and popular music). These are evident in many of his pieces (including the *Catenas* and *Kolo*), but manipulated in a complex manner which often renders the folk connection barely audible.

After emigrating to Australia Kos enrolled in music at the University of Adelaide and came into contact with the concert music of the 20th century. The impact of this music was striking: "it suddenly just hit me. That's exactly what I wanted all my life." He ascribes the appeal of this music to its complexity, both rhythmically and in terms of its generally dissonant harmonies: the sense of sounds clashing to create more interesting sonorities than those of traditional classical music.¹

Performances and Awards

Kos' compositions began to attract the attention of performers and broadcasters in Australia, as they also did later in Slovenia and other parts of Europe. His works subsequently came to be recognised with a number of prizes, most notably his celebrated violin concerto (1986), which won three Sounds Australian awards in 1991, including the National Music Critics' Award for Best Australian Orchestral Work. Although this concerto was premiered in Australia, its history is now tied more dramatically to that of Slovenia, as it was scheduled to be performed at that country's proclamation of independence in 1991. The performance was cancelled hours before it was due to take place, as tanks moved in, roads were blockaded, and war began.

It was also in Slovenia that Kos received the most substantial official recognition for the achievements of his career overall: in 2003 he was elected a Corresponding Member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Chamber Music

Writing for orchestra clearly has an important place in Kos' *œuvre* (in addition to those already mentioned, there are two further concertos as well as three other substantial pieces), and the composer is currently working on his First Symphony. The medium allows him, he says, to work with shifting sound masses and obviously with possibilities of instrumental colour not possible in chamber ensembles. In his chamber music the focus shifts, as it does for many composers, to the individual instruments, as well as to the possibilities of counterpoint, where two or more musical statements are plotted against each other, taking place simultaneously.

Catenas

The title *Catena* originates in a word meaning "chain, succession, or series," and the composer says it "refers to the form of the work[s] which consists of a closely connected series of segments." (*Catena 3* of 2003, for woodwind quintet, shares this approach to form.) In the first two *Catenas* each of the segments is distinguished by a specific musical idea which is repeated many times, each time varied a little in relation to its previous statements.

If both pieces take up the idea of constant metamorphosis within a series of connected, contrasting sections, the differences lie not only in their different linear (melodic) and harmonic material, but also in the instruments used, and in the way in which those instruments are combined within the pieces. The harmonic background across all the instrumental parts is fairly constant in *Catena 1* (1985), whereas in *Catena 2* (1992) the notion of counterpoint is more pronounced, with the instruments often in much more distinct layers: that is, two or more different instruments will play separate music, at the same time, which contrasts in terms of different rhythms, melodies, and harmonic profiles. This can be seen in the second piece's more pronounced interpretation of the idea of a chain, as in many cases one

¹ dissonances in jazz etc

instrument will continue playing its material across one segment into another, whilst other instruments begin new, contrasting material.

Catena 2, systematically explores the possible combinations of its ensemble of 6 instrumentalists: it is possible to form 15 different duos, 20 trios, 15 quartets, and so on. To incorporate all of these different combinations into a 12 minute piece would have created a form that was too sectionalised for the composer's taste, so he limited himself to 12 trios, 1 quartet, 6 quintets, and the full sextet which is reserved for the piece's climactic moments. The result is a whirl of different musical perspectives and changes.

Kolo

Kolo (1984) was commissioned by the Sydney International Piano Competition as a work to be performed by its competitors. The title designates a group of folk dances of the Slavic peoples of the Balkan peninsula, which vary in musical and choreographic character, but which have in common their origin as dances of friendship. The rhythms of *Kolo* are based on the asymmetrical groupings (often called "additive" rhythms) noted above in relation to Kos' music as a whole, but in this case directly related to the *Kolo* dances. The piece begins with a constant flow of fast notes, but certain pitches are accented and played louder than others, or occur in more prominent registers, to create lively, asymmetrical groupings.

Fatamorgana

It's not surprising, in view of the concerns outlined above, that Kos does not link much of his music to extra-musical concerns. He says his compositions are, rather, "usually based on some purely musical concept." The last piece on the programme, *Fatamorgana*, is an exception, but it took something as awful as the death of Kos' wife of 43 years, Milana, to prompt this change in focus. Kos has written:

Etymology:

Fata = Italian for fairy

Morgana (or Morgan le Fay) = half sister of the legendary King Arthur, usually represented as a scheming, evil fairy who seeks King Arthur's death

Traditionally the word fatamorgana (or Fata Morgana) has been used to describe an optical illusion (mirage) in deserts, resulting from a heated or a very cooled air, when a traveller sees objects that don't exist.

In my composition the title Fatamorgana is used as a metaphor for a deceptive/illusory hope. This was the first composition I wrote after my wife's death. During a relatively short period of her illness she was undergoing a series of tests, each associated with some hope that the disease could perhaps be beaten, only to be followed by a series of disappointments and eventually by a cruel realisation of the inevitable.

The composer's comments on the role of the percussion in the piece are suggestive in the light of his text above, as he says that the vibraphone is to sound in the distance, "painfully present, in the air and annoying." And the role of the marimba is one of interference with certain other elements in the music. The instruments in *Fatamorgana* again form distinct layers: generally the strings provide a quiet background in contrast to the melodic or linear utterances of the flute and clarinet. Three of the sections heard towards the beginning of the piece return at its end, but only distantly recognisable as their material is played backwards and inverted.

Students

Two works in the program tonight are by two composers who were students of Božidar Kos during his time at the Sydney Conservatorium, both of whom have had notable successes in their own right after completing their studies. Damien Ricketson's music has been performed by a number of Australian ensembles, as well as in the Netherlands and Poland, notably a commission from the Warsaw Autumn Festival. Matthew Bieniek's work has been similarly performed by several of Australia's instrumentalists and ensembles, and he was selected to represent Australia at the 2003 ISCM World Music Days (as, incidentally, was Kos), where Bieniek won the ISCM-CASH Young Composer Award.

Neither Ricketson nor Bieniek could be considered to be in a Kos "school" of composition, rather, the ways in which they might be thought to follow his footsteps are more subtle, as both attribute attitudes towards craftsmanship, responsibility, and attention to detail to his influence. Kos would regard this as a success: he has said that one of his intentions as an educator was to avoid the tendency of some teachers to impose particular styles on their students.

Trace Elements

One major area in which Ricketson's musical thinking departs from Kos' is that in recent years Ricketson has given much thought to the possibility of music's connection with extra-musical elements. *Trace Elements* (2003), enigmatically sub-titled "four unidentified genres for four undefined instruments", is a work which is conceived to operate on a purely musical level, yet appeal programatically to the notion of a music whose context and meaning was

once present and explicit, but is now forgotten. The stimuli for *Trace Elements* came from a description of a Renaissance manuscript known as the Krakow Lute Tablature. As is often the case with objects of the past, historians' opinions diverged in relation to this text including even basic information such as intended instruments, their tunings and the cataloguing of "unidentified genres". The multiplicity of possible musics that could be inferred from the Krakow manuscript provided a conceptual model for Ricketson to explore what is in fact one of his first works to embrace a level of indeterminacy (flexibility of interpretation).

The manuscript also resonated with other elements in the composer's recent musical interests. Unlike most modern classical music notation, tablature describes the actions the performer is to make, rather than the actual pitches that will be produced. In the case of the lute manuscript, when the tunings of the instruments are unknown, it is possible to gain a sense of broad gestures in the music – such as a high pitch moving to a low pitch – but the precise pitches remain impossible to determine.

Ricketson had already been conceiving of his music in such broad gestures. *Trace Elements* goes one step further as it is notated entirely in a form of tablature which describes generic physical actions that could be applied to any combination of two (wood)wind and two (bowed) string instruments. There are thus numerous possible realisations of the piece, but it retains a strong structural identity in the general gestures used, and through Ricketson's careful indications of the way the sound is to be shaped: its loudness or softness, and the different instrumental colours. This approach increases the focus on the physical gestures of the performers and presented the composer with an opportunity to get away from the abstract organisation of pitch and harmony and towards what he describes as a dirtier, more human kind of music.

String Trio

Matthew Bieniek has written music which takes its inspiration directly from extra-musical sources such as prose and poetry, but in titling this piece *String Trio* (2003) he signposts an interest in more exclusively musical concerns. Much of the work's surface is made up sounds which sit, and often move, between various points on a continuum: from the pitches traditionally produced on string instruments, to non-pitched noises made by non-traditional methods of sound production.

Pitch itself is also treated as both a series of points, and as movement, the latter through the use of glissandi (pitch slides). The piece thus, in the words of the composer, "paints" with spectrums of pitches and noise, fixed pitches and sliding pitches, and sound and silence. Of particular importance is the exploration of the grey areas between these extremes.

Other teachers: Michael Finnissy's *Springtime*

Michael Finnissy is an English composer whose work has been very prominent in his native country, and also particularly in Europe. He spent time in Australia in the 1980s, and his music has often featured in performance here. Several young Australian composers have sought him out as a teacher including, Matthew Bieniek, for instance, and also Matthew Shlomowitz, one of the founders of *Ensemble Offspring*. *Springtime* (2003) was composed as a wedding gift for Matthew Shlomowitz and Kirsten Le Strange.

Finnissy is a very prolific composer, and his music embraces a wide range of aesthetics and influences. *Springtime* is one of several of his works that provide individual parts from which the performers play, but for which no score exists: there is thus no written summary placing all the parts together so that their rhythmic relationships can clearly be seen. This encourages the performers to progress through the first part of the piece with a measure of independence from each other.

In the work's second section, all of the players' music shows their own part, as before, as well as that of the clarinet. This allows the musical parts to be coordinated in relation to the clarinet, instead of to underlying rhythmic (metrical) structures through which they count. The rhythm of this section can therefore become very free, as the clarinetist has the option of taking rhythmic liberties, and all the other parts may coordinate with that instrument in the moment of performance.

Tonight is *Springtime's* world premiere.

Acknowledgements

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