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VOX HUMANA: Antiphon of time

Time, the inexorable tick tock of reality measured. Reality measured, for without time is there no conscious reality. So maybe, just maybe, it is not only the canvass on which we musicians paint, but something markedly greater, the canvass of life itself. Without time, is there life? Where is life without time?

All this seems ponderous thinking for a winter's day, but still essential to musicians. Time yields everything. Time enables sound. Sound cannot be without duration, without time. We cannot hear, therefore, without time. Pitch ceases without time. If the capsules of air, or filaments of steel, or the hides of animals cannot vibrate so many instances per unit of time, pitch cannot exist. Hearing itself cannot be. Time is fundamental to the universe, to life functions, to music.

Who invented time? Was it a cosmic essential in a physical coming-to-be of galactic stuff? Did it start with a Big Bang? Or before? Did it have any beginning? Did God make time?

But, as time is also the tool of the musician, and musicians manipulate time as no one else (save perhaps writers or film makers who compel the brain to believe externally invented and imposed shifts of time), time demonstrates the real incomparability of musical art. Artists, no matter how primitive, sophisticated, schooled, native, young, old, remote, or urban, all understand and manipulate time. To so manipulate time is to brandish power surpassing the maddest dictator clutching the biggest of doomsday bombs. Time is power.

Tick tock says the metronome, tick tock, inexorable, precise to a fault, unceasing. In old days the wind up springs periodically spared us with the welcome relief of their spent, slack, silence. Sitting at the piano playing Beethoven after Beethoven with the metronome in approximate synchronization, the sudden silence lifted a leaden weight and freed the soul to suddenly flee into music. Youngsters don't have it so good anymore. Now, without intervention, that little battery can last a year or more of unremitting tick tock! And what maddening anti-music, to force conformity with the literal page, with the inadequacy of even the most sophisticated of notation to tell the real tale of Beethoven's heart and soul. Tick tock.

And so, we approximate, in part because we are frail and unable to force perception and intellect and muscles to do their work in tick tock time, and in part because the real musical shapes and stories live somewhere between the lines. As in jazz where the real pitch falls in the crack of the keyboard, or the bend of a reed, or the distance between the space and the line on the page (and so should not the violin be the perfect jazz ax rather than the sax), so in nearly all music, save maybe Cage, the tick tock notation of human imperfection can only approximate.

Sit at a MIDI keyboard (or, for the chic set, the MIDI interfaced console). Attach a laptop, start up a sequencing or notation program. Play as strictly as possible a passage of your best Bach. Then look at the view. The notation will resemble hash – for each

stutter of the neurons, twinge of a nerve, pop of a tendon, shake of a muscle, there's another 64th note tied to a 32nd note quintuplet. Rests we could have never have imagined litter the page. It's as though Webern had a breakdown with his pen in hand. But play it, and it's reasonable, cool, correct Bach.

If you have what's called a "piano roll" view, punch it up. Even more graphic, consider this picture of imprecise art. What tells the ear and the soul the perfection of Bach looks like the encephalogram of a seizure. Feet lag behind hands. Pitches higher up strike earlier. Lower pitches lag. Every chord is an appoggiatura unto itself. But this is no mark of failure, for great performances yield such erratic pictures. Time, elsewhere in the universe may be sterile and perfect. In real music, time is sloppy. And we musicians are the potent keepers of that powerful, compelling, muck.

It is the New Year, another tick tock of time. People celebrate such marked time in myriad ways. For some it is giddy, alcoholic revelry. For some, it is a Holyday of Obligation. In 2006, it falls on Sunday. Obligation notwithstanding, many readers will be (bleary eyed or not) sitting on accustomed benches. But, thinking back about 15 years to a New Year's Eve recital, playing the incomparable *Das alte jahr vergangen ist* from the *Orgelbüchlein* a few minutes before midnight, followed by a silent wait for bells to peal at the start of the year, proved again how marvelously music can manipulate time in ways that the physical universe, with its simple limitations of space and time, can not. To the universe, it is a matter of that tick tock; in art however, eternity can last but an instant, and an instant, eternity.

- Haig Mardirosian