

Jeremy Denk (Fringe)

PIANO SONATA, Op. 1

Alban Berg
1885–1935

The son of a well-to-do Viennese family, Alban Berg was taught piano by his governess. His father's death in 1900 brought on two disastrous school years, and he had to repeat both sixth and seventh grade. He did, however, start composing at 16. Uninterested in either an academic or business career, and too poor a student to enter the conservatory, he ended up as a private student of Arnold Schoenberg, with whom he studied from 1904 to 1911. The combination of family money and some teaching and music editing on the side assured him a career in music with little economic pressure. His first major public success came in 1925 with the opera *Wozzeck*. His second opera, *Lulu*, remained unfinished when he died of an infection resulting from an insect bite, aged 50.

Schoenberg, together with his students Berg and Anton Webern, made up what has come to be known as the Second Viennese School. The most salient stylistic feature of the School was Serialism, or the twelve-tone style – a style easier to explain than to hear. A serial composition is built upon a series, or row, of all twelve tones of the chromatic scale in which no pitch is repeated, and arranged so that they in no way suggest a tonal center, or key. Composers can use the tone row in a wide variety of ways, played backwards (in retrograde), upside down (in inversion) or in a combination (retrograde inversion); they can divide it into linear segments and expand of the resulting musical ideas. The row can also be arranged as a chord or divided into its smaller components as a set of tone clusters. The rhythmic possibilities are infinite. While Berg generally adhered to the mathematical constraints of Serialism, he always managed to give his music a distinctly lyrical, even a romantic twist. All his works, not just the early ones, retained a demonstrably melodic sensibility, and he often combined Serialism with hints of tonality. Following the premiere of *Wozzeck* he was dubbed “The Puccini of the twelve-tone system.”

The one-movement Piano Sonata clearly reveals both Berg's avant-garde and romantic tendencies. Written between 1907 and 1908 when Berg was still studying traditional counterpoint and harmony with Schoenberg, it was not composed under the master's scrutiny. It is a wholly independent work, resembling his teacher's early transitional compositions such as *Verklärte Nacht*. Berg, who had always had difficulty writing for instruments, considered writing a multi-movement work but ran out of inspiration for all but this single movement.

The work adheres to the classical sonata form, even including a repetition of the exposition. The three themes closely resemble each other in mood, but Berg conveys great emotional intensity in the phrasing, creating a series of internal climaxes. While the work seems at first to be freely atonal, the composer – unlike his teacher – includes tonal triads, sequences and cadences, ending in a long B minor cadence.

PIANO SONATA No. 1

Charles Ives
1874–1954

Composer, organist and businessman – Charles Ives managed to fulfill all three roles in his lifetime. His music was original, innovative and usually difficult to perform. As a result of

his reclusive habits and dislike of the professional world of music, he was reluctant to have his compositions performed during his lifetime. Even when they *were* finally performed, he usually refused to attend. His belief that all music is public domain led him not to secure copyrights for any of his works and to finance their publication himself – a luxury affordable only to a musician with an alternative income.

Ives inherited both his musical talent and love of American folk music from his father George, who had been the youngest bandleader in the Union Army. After the war George returned to Danbury, Connecticut, and pursued a variety of musical activities, performing, teaching and leading bands, orchestras and choirs in the area.

Young Charles studied piano and organ, and by his early teens was composing and giving recitals. At age 14, Ives became the youngest salaried church organist in Connecticut, and started composing anthems and sacred songs for church services. Most of these early works were based on popular tunes and Protestant hymns he heard at camp-meeting revivals where his father played the cornet. He claimed that his predilection for dissonance came from hearing multiple bands playing at the same time during parades.

After graduating from Yale in 1898, Ives moved to New York, entering the Insurance business with his college friend, Julian Myrick. The Ives & Myrick Insurance Agency became extremely successful, and Ives himself made significant contributions to the insurance industry that formed the basis of modern sales and estate planning. In a memoir, Ives attempted to answer the question of why a man so in love with music would go so enthusiastically into business. "Father felt that a man could keep his music-interest stronger, cleaner, bigger and freer, if he didn't try to make a living out of it... If he has a nice wife and some nice children, how can he let the children starve on his dissonances – answer that!" Ives thrived, rather than starved, on dissonance, wryly attributing the dissonance of much of his music to hearing local marching bands simultaneously playing different tunes. By 1902 he felt economically secure enough to quit his organist job, thereby leaving the weekends free for composing.

Characteristic to nearly all of Ives' works is the combination of wildly dissonant and seemingly unsystematic harmony, alternating with snatches of American patriotic folk songs and Protestant hymns. As meticulous and organized as he was in his business affairs, that is how disorganized he was with his music manuscripts. His major compositions had long gestation periods and were never "completed" to the composer's satisfaction, usually existing as a collection of penciled loose leaves. Throughout his life he worked and re-worked them, often adding or shifting whole movements, never fully satisfied with the final result. It was composer Lou Harrison who, in the 1940s, convinced Ives to allow him to rescue some of the most important manuscripts from oblivion, including the Symphony No. 3, the Second String Quartet and the Piano Sonata No. 1.

As with many of Ives's compositions, the Sonata was assembled from individual pieces composed between 1901 and 1909, often using material from earlier compositions. He assembled and revised the different movements around 1915–16. At some time he sent a fair copy to his old choirmaster John C. Griggs for comment, but the latter never responded and lost the manuscript. By then, Ives wrote, "I got started on something else, and I kept putting it off for so long a time, that, when I looked back at it, I had lost interest." Harrison copied

and edited the old manuscript – which was not even the final version – with Ives’s help and it was finally premiered by William Masselos in 1949.

In 1932, Ives dictated a disparate group of “memos” to his secretary in a half-hearted, often snide, response to questions concerning his music. *Memos* was then published in a quasi-autobiographical volume. Regarding the First Sonata, Ives wrote:

“What is it all about? ...Mostly about the outdoor life in Conn. villages in the ‘80s & ‘90s—impressions, remembrances & reflections of country farmers in Conn. farmland...There was usually a sadness—but not at the Barn Dances, with their jigs, foot jumping & reels, mostly on winter nights...In the summer times, the hymns were sung outdoors. Folks sang...in their own way...there were feelings of fervency.”

And his sketch does indeed help with an impressionistic appreciation. The first movement is divided into three sections with internal abrupt shifts of tempo and rhythm, all bound together by a lilting refrain. Movement iia is a brief energetic fantasy on the hymn “Bringing in the Sheaves.” concluding with a wistful strain of “Welcome Voice.” Movement iib, titled “In the Inn,” again alternates between sections of sprightly dissonance interrupted by gentle snatches of old songs – or the other way around. The third movement begins as a rambling Largo but by the middle develops into an exceedingly difficult fantasy on “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” before it wanders off again into the gentle Ivesian reverie that coalesces back into the hymn in a more melodic, purer incarnation.

The brief movement iva, which parallels iia in nature, is a toccata with rapid repeated chords and chord clusters that proceeds without pause into the second part (ivb), a syncopated continuation of the toccata, finally blaring out in a ragtime version of “Bringing in the Sheaves,” concluding with the hymn played with “fervency.”

The first notes of the final movement (v) constitute a theme that runs through the entire movement to give it a more “classical” shape than much of the composer’s work; it parallels the use of the same device in the opening movement. Despite a short agitated section, the mood of this movement is reflective, at times passionate. The pianistic style harks back to Brahms, one of Ives’s “top three” composers.

PIANO SONATA No. 2

Leon Kirchner
b.1919

Born in New York but raised in California, composer, conductor and life-long teacher Leon Kirchner studied with Arnold Schoenberg, Roger Sessions and Ernst Bloch. In 1961 he became Professor of Music at Harvard University, holding that position until his retirement in 1989, although he continued to compose and teach privately. In 1962 he initiated at Harvard a novel course that combined musical analysis with performance; this in turn gave birth to the Harvard Chamber Orchestra, which performed both traditional and contemporary repertoire. Kirchner’s musical output encompasses all genres, including an opera *Lily*, based on Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*. He has received numerous awards, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 for his Third String Quartet (with electronic tape).

Kirchner identified with the aesthetic goals of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, but he followed his own path, bucking the doctrinaire serialism that dominated composition after World War II, preferring a freer chromatic language and irregular rhythms. He once stated

his personal credo: "An artist must create a personal cosmos, a verdant world in continuity with tradition...and bringing new vision and beauty to the elements of experience. It is in this way that idea, powered by conviction and necessity, will create its own style and the singular, momentous structure capable of realizing its intent."

Kirchner composed the Piano Sonata No. 2 in 2002. It is a passionate work, yet one with moments of quiet reflection. The frequent shifts of mood, however, are in no way chaotic; they seem driven like a conversation with the self that works through a deep emotional problem via the stream of consciousness such internal dialogues inevitably produce.

Even at this late stage of his career, Kirchner continues to be grounded in the early twentieth century with its heady mix of musical languages, all bursting the bonds of tonality in diverse directions. Passages of late Romantic harmony avoid a central tonality, yet in no way approach the acerbic language of the pure serialists. Unresolved dissonances enable the drive of the work – sometimes in unexpected directions, supported by irregular rhythms, meters and tempi but there is no dissonance for its own sake.

Like all of Kirchner's piano music, the Sonata No. 2 makes considerable technical and emotional demands of the performer

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