

Still (2016) for solo piano

by Bruce Quaglia

Liner notes for New World Records album
James Romig: Still (#80802-2) © 2018
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In the not too distant past, a clear antagonism — or at least a palpable tension — existed between American composers of twelve-tone modernist music and those of minimalism. Steve Reich, for example, once decried an alleged moment of musical tyranny in the 1950s and 1960s when “anyone writing music that was not either serial or aleatoric was simply not worthy of the slightest consideration.”¹ Scholars have since disputed this narrative, referring to it as the “myth of serial tyranny,”² but the fact remains that battle lines were drawn for more than a generation between American composers that were no less fierce than the Stravinsky/Schoenberg divide of the mid-twentieth century, or the Brahms/Wagner gulf in the century before that. Following each of those periods of perceived opposition, some eventual musical reconciliation was achieved: Schoenberg himself reconciled the intense chromaticism of Wagner’s harmony with the progressive metrical and motivic teleology of Brahms’ allegedly old-fashioned musical language;³ Charles Wuorinen and other American composers then reconciled Schoenberg’s twelve-tone language with Stravinsky’s raw rhythmic and metric vitality, mining even that deep vein of Stravinsky’s late twelve-tone music for a new source of pitch-centricity.⁴ It has thus always been inevitable that

¹ Steve Reich, “Schoenberg” in *Writings on Music 1965 – 2000*. Steve Reich, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pg. 186.

² Joseph N. Straus, *Twelve-Tone Music in America*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pg. 199.

³ Arnold Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive,” in *Style and Idea*. New York: Faber. Pp. 398 – 441.

⁴ Charles Wuorinen and Jeffrey Kresky, “On the Significance of Stravinsky’s Late Works,” in *Confronting Stravinsky: Man, Musician and Modernist*, Jann Passler, ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. *Passim*.

the tensions between musical modernists and minimalists would eventually die down, and that composers from some subsequent generation would forge a musical reconciliation of the process-driven repetitions of minimalism with the advanced harmonic implications inherent in twelve-tone music. Something new and distinct would emerge from this opposition, and indeed, James Romig’s *Still* traces just such a path. In an era where many younger composers begin as if from a *tabula rasa*, with apparently little awareness of the concert music of even the recent past, Romig’s music picks up the threads of the two most influential musical trajectories of the American mid-late twentieth century and then moves forward with each in hand, in the most natural and unselfconscious of ways, leaving not even a hint of any remaining dialectical tension in the resulting music.

It would be far too simple to attribute this fusion of influences to the mere fact of Romig’s musical training: he was reared as a percussion student on Reich’s minimalist masterpieces at Iowa, and then studied composition with both Milton Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen while earning his doctorate at Rutgers. While this formative exposure must certainly have been critical grist for Romig’s creative mill, there is more to it, for this is a fully-formed language and not just some happy synthesis of various disparate elements. But what are those elements, and what claims can they still hold for a listener at this point in the twenty first century? Lurking behind many of those old debates about modernism and minimalism we find not the frequently cited (and equally empty) assertions about “tonal” vs. “atonal” languages – what those terms even meant to those critics who employed them is still anybody’s guess – but rather, a more basic question about *comprehensibility*. For composer Arnold Schoenberg, the father of the twelve-tone language, the question of a listener’s ability to comprehend music was tied at least in part to the degree of repetition which that music employs.⁵ Thus the “maximal diversity” that characterizes

⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique and Art of its Presentation*. Carpenter and Neff, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. Pg. 299

Milton Babbitt's music for example,⁶ wherein the musical surface is in some constant state of flux that requires the listener to hear associative relationships that pass from aural view as quickly as they emerge, may also be considered the basis of that music's beauty as well as its difficulty for the listener's ability to comprehend it. By contrast, minimalism presents a very high degree of repetition and a consequently slower rate of change, or *tempo of presentation* as Schoenberg would have called it. It is precisely this generously disposed musical aspect that the listener will immediately notice in Romig's *Still*. It is music measured as a slowly evolving meditation, and not merely by dint of the tempo, but rather as result of the placid presentation of its musical ideas in time. Although the pitch-materials in *Still* are quite unlike those of minimalist composers such as Reich, Glass, Riley, or Adams — who favored diatonic collections — the luxuriously slow pace at which Romig's ideas unfurl will seem familiar to listeners who know that music. But for Romig, this is not some marker of affiliation with a stylistic trait, it represents instead a phenomenological barrier for the listener, through which his music consciously attempts to push open a new path. The composer writes:

"Music exists in time, and time moves in only one direction. A listener's attention is temporally directed by the composer, and one is only able to revisit moments of music as much and as often as memory allows. Because of this, many works of music provide a listener with a relatively narrow aesthetic path, and the intention is for all listeners to have more or less the same experience. A viewer of visual art, on the other hand, is usually free to choose which artwork to observe, where to stand in relation to that artwork, where to look within the boundaries of the image, and for how long... The goal of this piano piece is to create a "museum of sound," allowing a listener to develop a notion of the work's entirety by listening to multiple iterative variations of

⁶ Andrew Mead, *An Introduction to the Music of Milton Babbitt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Pp. 19 – 44 and *passim*.

harmony (color) and rhythm (form)."⁷

The element of repetition that appears in this music is therefore less like that literal and persistent machine rhythm that is typically found in minimalism, but instead the surface presents a naturally recurring refrain, one with a slowly evolving measure of difference, one that opens a space through which the listener might then move freely to gain perspective. Natural processes, then, guide Romig's musical impulses to some degree, and this thought occurs elsewhere in his oeuvre as well. A frequent resident artist in the National Park System, Romig is clearly inspired by the natural world, though not in any romantic or pastoral sense. He has likened the experience of confronting the diverse complexity of the natural world to that of hearing a new piece of modern music:

"Some listeners might say that it is difficult to understand the music because it is difficult to imagine how it is created in the first place...what I wish to point out is that these phrases could just as easily be used to describe a national park. I feel that contemporary art music is far closer in structure and complexity to nature than any of the music that came before it. Most of us, especially those of us who love spending time in national parks, have reached an understanding that nature is seldom comprehended immediately, and that it is almost always necessary to devote personal time and energy into revealing the rich rewards that nature has to offer."⁸

Much like Elliott Carter's reminiscences of composing his *String Quartet No. 1*, a work he described as developing in response to the natural wonders that he found surrounding him on his daily walks in the Lower Sonoran Desert,⁹ Romig

⁷ James Romig, program note for *Still*.

⁸ James Romig, quoted in the article "Composer finds complexity of nature an inspiration," *Grand Canyon News*; June 12, 2012.

⁹ Elliott Carter, "String Quartets Nos. 1, 1951 and 2, 1959 (1970)" in *Elliott Carter: Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937-1995*, Jonathan Bernard, ed.

too finds in the natural landscape an inspiration for the complex processes that drive his own music, and which a listener might become sensitively attuned to. In so doing, the listener, like the attentive naturalist, will be amply rewarded.

Like the work of the visual artist Clyfford Still, for whom the piece is named, Romig's music is in no sense "representational," that is, it is neither pictorial nor programmatic in its expression, but relies instead upon abstract qualities of color and shape. While instrumental music has been frequently noted for its inability to be purely representational in its expression, to refer directly and unambiguously to some external object in the way that language and the visual arts can, there is nonetheless a clear narrative structure to much instrumental music of the past, particularly in the sonata forms that dominated the nineteenth century. Romig, like Clyfford Still, is essentially an abstract expressionist, one who draws his inspiration from nature, but he is not a story teller. His work is drawn much closer to the psyche and to unmediated experience.

The use of "color" in *Still* is the effect that is produced by the pitch structures out of which Romig develops his harmony. The work is not a "twelve-tone" piece per se — that is, there is no twelve-tone row that lies at the heart of this work to be reiterated in various complementary combinations — but instead it is based upon a string of twenty-four pitch-classes, and in this way the music shares some common cause with the basic idea of twelve-tone composition, but not with aggregate completion. A pitch-class is a percept that represents all the pitches or tones that sound the same even in different octaves, no matter how they are spelled. The "suchness" of pitch-class equivalency is foundational to the way that we hear and experience all music and it is an important element of *Still*, where the placement of notes into multiple registers — into octaves high and low — is a distinctive feature of the work's meditative sound world. Within the pitch-class chain for *Still*, each of the twelve pitch-classes of the total chromatic appears at least once, but the distribution of those pitch-classes is not at all even. Some pitch-classes appear twice, others three times. This may seem hardly worth pointing out though, because the more striking aspect of

the pitch-class string lies in its musical realization: this single sequence of pitch-classes sustains a work nearly one hour in length, without ever using any other transformation of that basic sequence. It takes the full length of the piece to exhaust but one traversal of the pitch-class string. This slow rate of harmonic development notwithstanding, repetitions of pitch-classes do regularly mark the intermediate surface of the music and shape the harmonic drift of the work, but they remain contained to the momentary harmony, which is presented at a deliberately gradual pace. The rate at which the materials of the twenty-four pitch-class chain are presented is at a near geologic, if still perceptible, scale. Within that temporal framework, eight distinct trichords — collections defined by three different pitch-classes — further divide the chain into eight discrete areas. These areas turn out to mark the form of the work in one way. Each of these trichords are of a different "quality," that is, they are made of a separate interval profile that yields a distinctive harmonic color. There are, in total, twelve such trichords that are possible to construct; but the ones that are excluded here are the over-familiar types loaded with tonal implication: the major, minor, diminished, and augmented triad types joined by the chromatic segment. One imagines that the sudden appearance of such a familiar sonority within a slow and delicately evolving texture like *Still's* would prove highly disruptive, and so it is not entirely surprising to find those sound-colors excluded.

The way that these eight areas appear, and then disappear again into one another, is truly the form of this work and the audible technique of creating that form. The process of harmonic expansion and contraction is what the listener will naturally attend to, consciously or otherwise. As each trichord accretes new notes and merges into the next one, the number of distinct pitch-classes that are present increases from three, to four, to five, and then to six, before then winding back down to only three again, marking the arrival of the next trichordal area. Romig has described each individual phase of these cyclic transformations — each time a note is added or subtracted — as an "iteration," allowing not only for the listener to gain the perspective of a museum visitor (or perhaps even a visitor to a national park), but also allowing the performer the liberty of taking various incomplete routes through the entire piece. This recording is of the complete work, but

other performances are possible and permitted. The process of addition and then subtraction of new notes is entirely audible to the listener because of the very slow rate at which these emerge and then disappear again. This creates a rhythm that marks the passage of time through an ever-evolving refrain, one that returns again and again, but each time slightly different.

If each new piece of modern music must be learned anew by the listener, as a contextual art work with little or nothing in common to reference in other works, and with certainly far less in common than the tonal works that together comprise the common practice era, then *Still* is a very patient teacher. The process of learning how the piece “goes” is both literal and transparent. *Still* shares certain general harmonic traits with the more difficult music of twelve-tone masters like Milton Babbitt and Donald Martino, but it is utterly distinct in that it gives the listener the opportunity to hear harmonic techniques develop before their ears, even in the first listening. Put another way, both Babbitt and Martino often composed less with twelve-tone rows than with the permutation of various hexachords (collections of six different pitch-classes) that are made up out of the constituent trichords that combined to make their sub-collections. The ways that Martino and Babbitt did this varied, but the result was a nearly continuous circulation of the *aggregate* – the collection of all twelve pitch-classes – at a relatively brisk pace. The preferred hexachords were those that could be recombined to produce aggregates while the trichords were constantly being shuffled on the surface. Romig’s language eschews the need to constantly produce aggregates at the surface, but retains the slower process of combining trichords to produce new hexachords. In this way, a maximal diversity is still produced but at an audible rate. In fact, this is exactly what the listener – without necessarily being conscious of it – hears while attending to the process of expansion and contraction in *Still*. While I have already suggested that the harmonic areas that mark the form of the piece are the specific individual trichords that emerge and then recombine before dissolving into the next trichord, that is only partially correct; what they recombine into is a series of seven different hexachords. Each subsequent hexachord is the result of a common trichord taken from the last contraction, and then a new one added to it from the next expansion. The process is breath itself – it is marked at each end by the expiration into a new

trichord, but it is a single breath held throughout as it grows into the fullness of the next hexachord and then exhales again. A kind of micro-drama ensues as each breath reaches its apex of harmonic complexity with the completion of the next hexachord.

While the sensitive listener will be immediately rewarded by Romig’s *Still*, like all great music, repeated and increasingly attentive hearings will yield more and more. As one moves past some initial phase of listening closely in the moment to notice the profound “rightness” of where Romig has placed each of his notes in both time and space within a particular iteration, their ear will next be drawn to the way that each new note enters and then turns the color this way and that within *Still*’s harmonic palette. Some of those notes will begin to feel more strange than others, presenting something expressively charged and full of possibility. The listener thus becomes aware of the larger harmonic field of the work and may or may not choose to then begin listening closely for the aspiration and exhalation of trichords and hexachords passing to and from one another. But either way, one will quickly want to merely lose themselves in the process of listening to this remarkable work.