

Parametric Counterpoint: Babbitonian Ideals In Composition and Performance

by James Romig (© 2003)

Milton Babbitt: A Celebration Of His Life and Music
Millsaps College, 1 November 2003

Most—and certainly most of us at a conference such as this—agree that the best way to truly comprehend and appreciate the compositions of Milton Babbitt is to hear them. Few—and even few of us at a conference such as this—can absorb, through score-reading alone, the multi-layered richness and correspondence that informs even the most brief of Babbitt’s compositions. Numerous theorists have assured us, over the years, that Babbitonian constructs are, in fact, aurally perceptible, and that by paying close attention to the music itself—as it is heard—we can glean the “point” of a Babbitt composition. Though this observation is comforting and reassuring for musical scholars, and is a relief to young composition students, it places an extraordinary responsibility in the hands of the performer, who must find a way to articulate highly complex and highly original musical figures in such a manner that an informed listener—without aid of a printed score—can draw meaningful conclusions about Babbitt’s music.

There is one major difference between Babbitt’s music and the “classic” music that most of us are most familiar with—the music on which most of our musical training is based, and the music that dominates most of our concert halls. The difference is that Babbitt’s music is extremely efficient in its presentation of information, with no literal repetition and few, if any, rhetorical redundancies: every pitch, every rhythm, every dynamic, every timbre, every articulation, every registral shift means something, and contributes equally, or at least significantly, to the meaning of the entire composition. In classic music, there is a sort of parametric hierarchy: certain musical elements hold subservient roles to more primary elements—melody and harmony—that provide the principle structure of a work.

Take for example, any familiar classic: Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, Beethoven’s *Fur Elise*, or Tchaikovsky’s ubiquitous Piano Concerto. Now imagine hearing them “performed” by a cellular phone or a cheap electronic keyboard. These classic works retain their identities (though not their beauty) even when stripped of parameters such as dynamic, articulation, timbre, and phrasing. The original versions of these works contain more or less specific performance indications for these “secondary” musical elements, but these elements serve primarily to illuminate and support the qualities of melody and harmony that inform the composition. They are, therefore, in some ways redundant; they function in the role of rhetorical support, and in some cases these musical parameters can be underemphasized or even ignored in performance without doing fatal damage to the meaning of the work as a whole.

In the music of Milton Babbitt, there is no such hierarchy of musical elements: each musical parameter carries essential information critical to the comprehension of the overall musical gesture. This is not to suggest that the parameters carry independent information, but rather that the interaction, the counterpoint, of all parameters creates the musical thought, and that any missing parameter can blur, alter, or destroy the meaning of the work. Though these multiple parametric significances lend Babbitt's music an admirable integrity that rewards an attentive listener, we are (quite fortunately, it seems to me) not likely to hear recognizable elevator-music versions of *Philomel* when we shop for groceries, nor will we ever hear the opening phrase of *Canonical Form* chirping from a cell-phone on a crowded subway.

In classic music, it is generally the case that a misperformed dynamic or articulation will not do as much damage to a performance as a misplayed pitch or rhythm. In the case of Babbitt's music, misconstrual by a performer of any musical element might mortally wound the composition or, at the very least, obfuscate its intended meaning. The price paid for Babbitt's high degree of efficiency in composition is that it requires an identical degree of efficiency from performers. The entire musical meaning hangs on every musical inflection, for every musical inflection is an integral part of the entire musical meaning. Performers simply cannot approach this music hierarchically, the way that they might approach music of the classic eras. The vast riches that inform any of Babbitt's compositions can only be revealed when a performer understands and transmits the significance of all musical parameters—including parameters that, in much other music, tend to be "icing on the cake." In a work by Milton Babbitt, the cake itself is so rich in flavor that it has no need for icing. Or more accurately, the icing is so perfectly integrated into the cake that any more or any less would significantly change not only the quality, but the overall *meaning* of the cake.

When facing the densely integrated, enormously efficient music of Milton Babbitt, I am often reminded of a quote from Oliver Strunk, admired by E.B. White in the introduction to my favorite composition handbook, "The Elements of Style."

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

In the musical grammar of Milton Babbitt, every word does indeed tell. Over the next few minutes, John McMurtery will examine some important features of Babbitt's *None but the Lonely Flute*, and he will demonstrate what is required of a performer who wishes to convey the complex and beautiful information within. He will also demonstrate, in a performance of one of my own compositions—*Sonnet 2*, for unaccompanied flute—how Babbittian performance practice must be employed in the works of the many composers influenced by Babbitt's compositional ideals. After John's performances, Professor Babbitt will join us in answering your questions.