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Dios los cría

Benjamin Dwyer

Dios los cría, y ellos se juntan: “God makes them, and they find each other.”

That’s what comes to my mind whenever I think of Barry Guy and Maya Homburger. Now, I know that my Spanish friends will protest, arguing that this old adage is used to describe those characters who live on the other side of the fence, who, shall we say, profit through illicit activity or live on the margins of “civilized” society. But there *is* something about Homburger and Guy that places them on the other side of the fence—as cross-genre musicians they transgress carefully protected precincts of musical activity: Guy, the improviser, is equally comfortable in Baroque performance; Homburger, the Baroque music specialist, is an exceptional improviser. And there is certainly something that feels illicit in their live performances; when they play, flick knives are drawn. As the devil in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* reminds us, the artist is the brother of the felon and the madman. But my real point here is that as individuals these musicians are remarkable; when they play together something even more extraordinary and unique happens. *Dios los cría*...

I have heard Guy perform in many different capacities and groupings, and am slowly beginning to understand what might be described as his “signature” as a musician. Extraordinarily, each time I hear him, it’s like the first, because his improvisations always take you somewhere new. I distinctly remember first hearing Guy about fifteen years ago in St. Canice’s Cathedral in Kilkenny town. He came out with his bass and a tray of bows, sticks, mallets, and something that looked remarkably like a toilet brush. The moment the bow touched the strings, something magical occurred. It’s very difficult to describe the effect his playing had on me. This was the first time I heard sounds being created alchemically, as it were, in front of my eyes and ears; music that slashed at you, took your breath away, modulated suddenly from vicious stabs to tender caresses. There was an incredibly exhilarating physicality, in a true sense a “bodying forth” to this music-making. Gestures of color, line and harmony were spontaneously interwoven and in constant flux, but never incoherent. Everything seemed to be in the right place, and yet this was being formed, performed, enacted straight out of Guy’s physical and musical conscious-

ness; the moment of composition, execution, and hearing was instantaneous.

Despite the difference in genre, Homburger's interpretations of Baroque music have quite the same effect. Yes, the music is largely notated, the melodic and harmonic trajectories set, but Homburger's total understanding of performance style and her astounding technical prowess give her a freedom of expression that matches the seeming impulsiveness of Guy's improvisations. Debates about performance practice are still divisive. It's hard to deny the interpretative validity of some renowned performers who play Bach and Handel in pretty much the same way they play Schumann. Richter does bring a certain dark majesty to Bach (his Fugue no. 4 in C-sharp minor, from the *Preludes and Fugues*, for example). But in Homburger's hands, we are brought very close to the true spirit of Baroque music. She utterly understands the rhetoric at the core of this music. So when you hear her perform one of Biber's *Mystery Sonatas*, for example, you are not only fully aware of her ability to musically characterize specific ideas and symbols relating to the subject matter of the music, you are deeply implicated in, and affected by, her rhetorical delivery. This is what makes her performances of Baroque music so special: like Guy's improvisations, they are alchemical experiments. The listener is brought into an intimate, coterminous relationship with the music—an experience that can be both exhilarating and vulnerable.

There is more going on with Guy and Homburger, though, than exceptional technique, inventive improvisation, and judicious performance practice; something deeper is at work. As a guitarist and composer, I've been intensely drawn to the alchemical mystery at the core of great performances and great music that bypass the intellect, whether written or improvised. Of course, this quality is not confined to music or performance disciplines; transformative experiences come in prolonged engagements with art and literature. I still wonder about an inexplicable encounter I had with Goya's *Pinturas Negras* at the Prado a few years back: it was totally cathartic, transcendental I would say. We all know the effect powerful literature can have on us—there's a life before Beckett, and a life after.

But direct experience of the performative arts at their best brings you into immediate encounters that are both cathartic and inscrutable. Recalling my own experiences over the years, I can say that they've appeared unexpectedly and in different forms, and are sometimes even carried through recordings. Those that come immediately to mind include Jimi Hendrix's 1969 live recording of *Red House* in San Diego, Will Bond per-

forming Robert Wilson's *BOB* in Dublin, Alfred Cortot's Chopin recordings, and Estrella Morente's live show at the Palau de la Musica in Barcelona in 2006. Because their performances are so intense and committed, Homburger and Guy deliver this kind of experience.

So what happens when we experience these transformational performances; what accounts for the magical encounter with Guy and Homburger? For the want of a better word, I have so far called these experiences alchemical. But there *is* a more accurate word: the Spanish term *duende*. *Duende* literally means goblin or elf, but the sense in which the Spanish use it is untranslatable. For me, it has come to serve as the benchmark for what a real performance, what a true composition should be, and it applies to all arts. In his wonderfully poetic essay, "The Theory and Play of Duende," Lorca writes of "a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought."¹ He continues: "I have heard an old maestro of the guitar say, 'the duende is not in the throat; the duende climbs up inside you, from the soles of the feet.' Meaning this: it is not a question of ability, but of true, living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation." I think this gets close to what happens when Homburger and Guy play. It's not a matter of technique, but rather the desire to push technique to the precipice; to push the possible over the edge into the realm of what was thought impossible, where new experience or knowledge reside. This is why their performances are not characterized solely by technical effortlessness, as are those of so many of our incredibly skilled performers today. Despite their exceptional technique, they don't rest comfortably on digital ability. Self-surpassing, they move beyond technique towards what Lorca calls "a real and poetic evasion of this world."

But such poetic evasion is not easily attained. It requires risk in performance. This is the dark side of *duende* that few artists are prepared to invite into their lives and their work. Lorca tells us that *duende* does not come unless death is a possibility: a particularly dark sentiment that could only come from a Spaniard whose country is unique in celebrating death as a national spectacle in the ritual of the bullfight. The theme is also conspicuous in George Steiner's observation that every carving is the death of stone. A sense of dark risk is palpable when Guy and Homburger carve music out of silence. Lorca says that, "with idea, sound and gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well," which is why *duende* sweeps the ground "with its wings of rusty knives." Such risk in performance is rare these days. I'm not sure whether it's the result of the "perfection" of CD recordings, a market-driven "quality control," or a

shallow display of conservatoire-trained technical brilliance, but let's face it, few performers fight on the edge of wells.

Considerations about technique are important in relation to Homburger and Guy. We shouldn't forget that technique is simply a conduit, it directs and articulates musical information, it does not originate it. However, if we reflect upon the ancient Greek term *technê*, I think we get to the heart of the matter. As opposed to mere technique, *technê* is a mode of knowledge, which, though associated with the domain of art or craft, is more properly understood as the embodiment of knowledge. In this sense, *technê* is knowledge gained from "doing"; an embedded knowledge, or to use Bourdieu's term, a "tacit" knowledge. I think that the "bodying forth" of music in the act of supreme performance, making manifest the heightened expression of this tacit knowledge is what Lorca means by *duende*; hence his remarks that:

All arts are capable of *duende*, but where it finds greatest range, naturally, is in music, dance, and spoken poetry, for these arts require a living body to interpret them, being forms that are born, die, and open their contours against an exact present.

With that combination of *technê* and risk, Guy and Homburger open the contours of their music in moments haunted with *duende*. I don't suggest that this happens in every performance. *Duende* doesn't always come when called. But the channels have to be open for it, and that requires constant work, constant intense engagement with the craft, recalibrating interpretations in light of study, practice and rehearsal. This last point is not about developing technique; it's about engendering tacit knowledge through committed preparation.

I saw this intense commitment first hand when Homburger and Guy, along with David Adams on harpsichord, were working on a large-scale composition of mine called *Umbilical*. It first became clear when I visited Guy and Homburger at their home in Switzerland for two days of rehearsals; I'd never before had the experience of having my music interpreted, worked on, studied as intensely as this. The second day was particularly concentrated. Homburger worked upstairs in her study, which has an amazing view of the Swiss Alps, Guy was in the basement—a renovated underground swimming pool that's big enough to house all his basses and immense architectural drawing boards, which he uses to write his visually beautiful scores. I was working with Guy, testing and re-testing

fingerings and figurations. Suddenly, a call on the mobile: I'm wanted upstairs to discuss a passage with Homburger. I run upstairs and spend thirty minutes in a deep discussion about bowing. A call on the mobile: Guy wants me downstairs because of a tessitura problem. I run downstairs. We solve it before another issue with double-stops needs to be sorted. Then, another call: I'm wanted upstairs again. The session went on for five hours without a break: upstairs, downstairs, upstairs, downstairs. I never before witnessed such total engagement from musicians in getting a score into shape. This is the work behind the scenes that few see. It's also the process of embedding the score in the hands and body, of absorbing the music as tacit knowledge so that during performance *duende* may come.

Umbilical is a nine-movement work written for amplified Baroque violin, double bass, harpsichord, and tape that situates the Oedipus myth from the perspective of Jocasta—mother and lover of Oedipus. Lasting almost an hour, the music covers vast ground technically, but also in other ways, as it explores the complexity of Jocasta's emotional, psychological, sexual, and socio-political predicament. For my purposes, I reduced the *dramatis personae* to three, giving each an instrument—Jocasta (violin), Oedipus (bass) and Laius (harpsichord)—thereby situating Jocasta between her unfulfilled past and tragic future. It's difficult for me to talk about *Umbilical* from an objective perspective, but in the première I truly felt that all three musicians brought something extraordinary to their performances. The complex interactions between Jocasta and Oedipus, in particular, were so beautifully wrought that they brought out elements in the music of which I had not myself been totally aware. I'm not sure if it was a result of their being partners in life, but Homburger and Guy brought something deeply personal to *Umbilical*—in that first performance, it seemed that Guy *was* Oedipus, Homburger *was* Jocasta; God made them, and they found each other.