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‘plug yourself into despair and sing it for us’—Barry Guy’s Time Passing

A teleological strategy lies at the heart of Barry Guy’s *Time Passing*. This is made more unambiguous by his choice of Edward Morgan’s poem *Epilogue: Seven Decades* as a structural blueprint. The work was initially inspired in part by Johann Christoph Bach’s wedding cantata, *Meine Freundin, du bist schön*, which offered something of a template in terms of its instrumental and vocal combinations. *Time Passing* is thus composed for strings, baritone, and soprano, to which Guy has ingeniously added two free-floating elements—an additional improvising soprano voice and double bass. Moreover, Morgan’s poem is skillfully juxtaposed and overlaid with a series of poetic fragments by Kerrie Hardie. The setting of these texts not only represents a musical reflection on both continuity and change but also an examination of war and death, youth, and the aging process, with themes of memory, loss, commemoration, and aspiration running through its collated sections. Each movement takes us steadfastly through decades of a life in musical settings of extraordinary power, vitality, and poignancy. Unexpectedly, the seventh decade does not lead naturally to the eighth but rather transports us into a different realm—an extended meditation on fragments of Samuel Beckett’s illusive and enigmatic text, *Ping*, set in both English and its original French. Temporality seems to be suspended during this interiorization of narrative and music. Emerging out of this episode, we return to words by Hardie and Morgan, and the concluding if open-ended eighth decade.

It is not hard to see *Time Passing* as a personal statement. Born in 1947, Guy was in his sixties when he composed the work. In the score, that’s the decade interrupted by Beckett’s text. This seems an apt intervention, as it is no secret that the Irish writer has been an abiding influence on the composer and his artistic temperament. Next year Guy will enter his eighth decade and thus *Time Passing* can be seen as both a reflection of the composer’s past and a commentary on his future. While one is reluctant to overemphasize the innate biographical intention of the work, it perhaps should not come as a surprise that a composer and performer of Guy’s stature and experience should, at this particular period in his creative trajectory, seek to ask philosophical questions relating to his own life. *Time Passing*, however, transcends the mere personal to offer deep and profound musical meditations of a universal reach.

Scanning his late works, we see that Guy’s ambitions have been encyclopedic. Works composed since the new millennium have tended toward the monumental—*Inscape-Tableaux* (2000), *Folio* (2002), *Oort-Entropy* (2003), *Gaia II* (2010), *Time Passing* (2012), and *The Blue Shroud* (2014) all last up to an hour or even longer. But this monumentality does not suggest an enclosed totality, which I think would insinuate an ideological arrogance foreign to his sensibility. In *Time Passing*, Guy appropriately seeks *la forma aperta*, an open-ended structure, which is not only apparent in the work’s multi-movement design that easily conveys the listener through myriad musical styles and performance practices, but also in its philosophically inconclusive finish—if the word “finish” can be suitably employed for that moment in *Time Passing* when the actual music fades away and we are left with our own ongoing and deeply felt resonances.

As I have suggested, this open-endedness also pertains to Guy’s simultaneous accommodation of multiple creative modes and strategies. Counterpoint and palimpsest are central to his compositional approach. The layering of various texts and musics of mixed genres in ways that suggest statement and echo, narrative and subtext, conscious declaration and subconscious undertone, is a deliberate act of creative interanimation that gives *Time Passing* that same richness of memory, loss, and expectation that constitutes the tapestry of our own lives. We experience this from the very beginning in the work’s introductory section. A strange atmosphere of existential questioning is established here with layered narrating voices (Beckett) immediately followed by interweaving glissandi on strings (echoes of Xenakis?) and dislocated vocal outbursts). This offers a kind of stunned, inarticulate confusion, a primal bewilderment in the face of existence, to the extent that, when the baritone enters for the first time on fragments of Beckett’s text, its overtly tonal and cohesive melodic lines come as something of a surprise. But this is what Guy manages throughout—a

juxtaposition of styles, genres and tonalities that emits a dazzling *combinatoire* of musical and textual “signals.”

Such an amalgamation of modes and strategies might imply a formal weakness and a loss of unified language. But the very strength of the music lies in its multivalent nature. *Time Passing* works because it represents the culmination of a life’s achievement in music; and Guy’s particular trajectory has been rather unique. He brings to his compositional palette the benefit of over half a century of improvisation of the highest order. He also leans on decades of experience as a Baroque specialist having performed with many of the principal orchestras uniquely dedicated to the genre. His close personal and working relationship with Maya Homburger—one of Europe’s leading Baroque violinists—has been a key factor in Guy’s integration of Baroque aesthetics with his own compositional stratagems. Occasionally, this emerges as a kind of cross-pollination, but in more recent works it manifests itself in astute juxtapositions of the Baroque with other stylistic idioms from the fields of jazz and contemporary music. In *Time Passing* the reference to Bach’s cantata is patent. However, indebtedness to major figures of high modernism in music is also undisguised, though it emerges through subtle and unconscious tactics of citation. Ligeti, Berio, and the above-mentioned Xenakis come to mind at numerous points and in varying guises; though they do so in such thoroughly integrated and sublimated ways that we perceive Guy’s assimilation of them more as a natural consequence of *his* “time passing” through the history of 20th-century music.

Thus, we are invited to listen with ears wide open. Guy’s control of the string writing is consummate, ranging from tense tremolos to calm, floating sonorities. His use of extended techniques is never arbitrary; these have not made their way into the music simply for the sake of facile demonstration. Exemplary in this regard is the music at the end of Movement I, where a sustained, luminously still string sound is abruptly disturbed by two aggressive chords and immediately followed by an extraordinary sonority of floating, glistening harmonies. Executed with circular bowing—using both the wood and hair of the bow—this is a sonic transformation that perfectly prepares us for the words “so was he right?” (Morgan). The strings constantly shift in coloration and grain but they always serve to offer sonic reflections of the text. That text is conveyed through two voices, which interact in an interesting dialectic. While there is some sharing of poetry, predominantly the soprano sings of the wartime memories of Hardie’s father, while the baritone recalls Morgan’s reflections upon his own life as it passes through the decades. (Singers Anja Pöche and Matthew Brooks are exceptional in their respective parts.) As one of the free-floating elements, Guy’s own bass improvisations are reserved primarily for transition sections, but he offers Savina Yannatou’s improvising soprano free rein. Her live, on-the-spot interventions offer an extraordinary range of vocal sounds that act as non-discursive though highly receptive responses to the unfolding texts. She adds a strangely beautiful if primordial element to the music.

Indeed, the way Guy holds together within a single musical paradigm such an array of musical styles and practices is most impressive. This amounts, however, to more than a mere recombination of past and present archetypes. Guy’s intimate knowledge of Baroque aesthetics, particularly its deep connection with musical rhetoric, has profoundly impacted his compositional approach. (Renaissance and Baroque music was intrinsically grounded in the theories of Greek and Roman rhetoric. The practice sought to discover musical *figurae* that amplified the meaning of set texts.) An illustration of this can be observed in his signature use of “prepared” bass: the insertion of an aluminum rod between the strings of the instrument in Movement II, which when struck, oscillates rapidly providing a strange, eerie, rhythmic knocking, as of bones rattling. This is not mere theatrics or special effects; it offers a direct musical amplification of the text: “My father told me how he dug up graves, / picking out thigh bones two per person” (Hardie). The bone motif is further enhanced in the orchestration of the strings where Guy, under each syllable of the line, ‘picking out thigh bones’, correspondingly picks out a new instrument as the line unfolds. Meanwhile, the plurality of “Lives, lives, lives, theirs...” (Hardie) is rhetorically captured in the melismatic string writing heavily “peopled” with layered, meandering notes.

Thus, *Time Passing* not only serves as Guy's personal and universal statement on the processes of life and death, it also functions as a culmination of centuries' worth of musical influence, almost as a précis of western musical aesthetics. This, of course, provokes debate regarding his musical language. It is impossible to listen to *Time Passing* without being confronted by fundamental questions concerning Guy's musical aesthetics. Jazz, free jazz, Renaissance and Baroque styles; tonality, atonality, standard and graphic notation; popular and "serious" forms; lyrical settings and abject interventions; avant-garde vocal improvisations and extended instrumental techniques—all these facets, be they clearly complimentary or seemingly contradictory, feed into Guy's compositional method. This Babel tower of multinarrativity, its heady mix of stylistic and technical features, has all the hallmarks of a postmodernist debunking of high modernism's monumentality, and its tendency towards the meta-narrative. Its eclecticism could be perceived politically, and negatively, as a kind of aesthetic and discursive heterogeneity that explicitly replicates the commodity fetishism of advanced capitalism. Is this what Guy's music is all about? Is his rejection of an aesthetic homogeneity, his dismissal of a singular voice in his music, nothing more than a shallow postmodern conceit, what Frederic Jameson describes as "a disenchanting and uninhibited superficiality"?

The only way I can answer these valid questions is by suggesting that, unlike much postmodern art, Guy displays no sense of historical deafness, political or aesthetic. As I have outlined already, his absorption of the Baroque extends beyond the mere application of sophisticated techniques of pastiche to embody the practice of rhetoric at the core of pre-classical musical aesthetics. Furthermore, while such a cornucopia of stylistic and technical features gives the impression of a musical aesthetic comprising little more than what Lyotard describes as floating intensities, the way that Guy weaves these elements tells another story. Firstly, the harmonic and textural fabric of *Time Passing* retains a rich depth of field that contradicts postmodernism's tendency toward flat surfaces unreflective of any deeper meanings. Furthermore, the work does aspire to offer a substantive message, a single meta-narrative underpinning and binding its multiple texts, and it is driven by an ethical resolve that gives gravitas to the work. However, what really characterizes the music is its thoughtful investigation of the inner impulses of consciousness in a way that implies an imminent transformation of that consciousness. This wholly transcendental quality marks *Time Passing* as fundamentally modernist or, from our 21st-century perspective, what might be described as neo-modernist.

This attempt to pin down what Guy does, to address his compositional *raison d'être*, is more than a mere musicological preoccupation. It is important because it helps us define his musical idiolect, that is, the distinct compositional signature of a composer at his creative height. And given the complexity of *Time Passing*, such an understanding will allow us to listen to it in different ways; it will give us access to its unique musical and linguistic codes. But this very complexity suggests a further attribute. The narrative and structural intricacy of the work is not only a consequence and reflection of the disconnect prevalent in modern society, the postmodern destabilization of classical narratives as a basis for our understanding of contemporary life making cohesive unison and integration unlikely. Its capacity to bring polysemic entities into close and simultaneous quarters is also a model by which structural fragmentation and stylistic difference can be harnessed in ways that make great art.

There is a further corollary here that needs to be considered. *Time Passing* acts as a type of philosophical treatise in the same way that much of Beckett's writing does. What Guy manages so well here is to capture a kind of Hegelian negation at the core of Beckett's work. This is a negation that nonetheless admits a dialectical acquiescence to positivity; hence Beckett's insistence (voiced in a 1956 letter to Robert Pinget) not to lose heart but to "plug yourself into despair and sing it for us." By the time we have experienced the extended moment of the *Ping* setting, we have been led toward what Heidegger coins as *Lichtung*, a "clearing" in our own existence. This is the extraordinary achievement of *Time Passing*. And it is this clearing that allows Guy to finally contemplate the seemingly contradictory facets of the

texts in the final section (“At seventy”) where resigned reflection of the past is counterpoised with a charged, positive futurity. What has been brought into luminous disclosure is not only a sense of boundless astonishment in the face of existence, a reflection upon the act of reflection itself, but also a challenge to face impending death head on; hence the extraordinary music that accompanies the final section with its imperative to “switch the whole thing right on” (Morgan). At this moment, a kind of musical fission occurs, releasing an explosive and numinous energy that is rare. The music quite literally lights up, as does the heart when we listen.