

PROGRAMME NOTES

By David Kaplan

Tonight's program explores the grey area between composition and improvisation. I play works that are in some way improvisatory, whether in the performative or interpretive freedom suggested by their content, or in the flow of ideas evident in the process of their composition.

Sometimes the fantastical element is counterintuitive: in Cerrone's *Passagework*, for example, it is the singularity of idea that lends an improvisational streak, though its structure is rigidly planned, and its proper performance tolerates little interpretive freedom.

All solo keyboard music is in some sense rooted in improvisation, since its original genre was the "prelude." The prelude was always the functional, public cousin of the private, perhaps dysfunctional "fantasy:" it warms up a room, warms up an audience, warms up a "key," warms up a keyboard, and warms up a keyboardist. It prepares for something else to happen afterwards—something more preconceived, and probably more substantial.

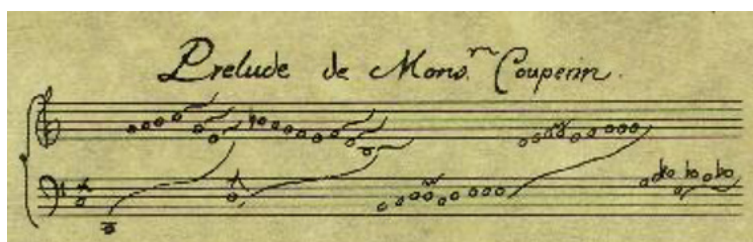
I have structured tonight's program as a series of preludes to fantasies, as it were, though I suppose this pattern should begin to break down as the evening progresses.

The first of these preludes is the well known and loved *Barricades Mystérieuses* by François Couperin. Its *style brisé* texture created by broken chords forms an ostinato that envelopes the listener and the keyboardist alike in a hypnotic trance.

Also an ostinato, Christopher Cerrone's *Passagework (2020)* was written in tandem with Anthony Cheung's *Holding Patterns*—each composer drew material from the other as an inspiration point for his own piece. In that sense, they are meaty preludes to one another. Christopher Cerrone writes the following:

While working on the project with David and Anthony, the latter mentioned that his composition had a lot of "passagework," a word that was unfamiliar to me at the time but doubtlessly known to most pianists. "Passagework" is, according to Merriam-Webster, "a section of a musical composition characteristically unimportant thematically and consisting especially of ornamental figures." Despite the derisive connotation, I loved the phrase, and particularly loved the dual meaning of "passage," not just a musical figure but also a journey. I sought to create such a journey by transforming a single "repeated note" figuration into a composition whose mood shifts from the melancholic to the tense to the delicate to the triumphant.

Louis Couperin, uncle of the more famous François Couperin, wrote numerous short works for solo harpsichord that test the tune of the instrument and warm up the instrumentalist. Called "unmeasured preludes," they are printed as a series of whole notes contained by no meter—a notation Couperin himself invented. Some notes are linked together by slurs, and their possible combination into scales, trills, chords, and other idiomatic gestures gives some clue as to their appropriate execution; but the rhythm is most of all up to the player's sense of *bon gout*, or good taste. Some of these preludes are more spirited toccatas that lead to a short contrapuntal section in strict time; but this one in F major belongs to the more contemplative and elegiac tombeau style.



Anthony Cheung tells us the following about *Holding Patterns*:

Intermittent wet under
cloud cover, dry
where you are. All day
this rain without

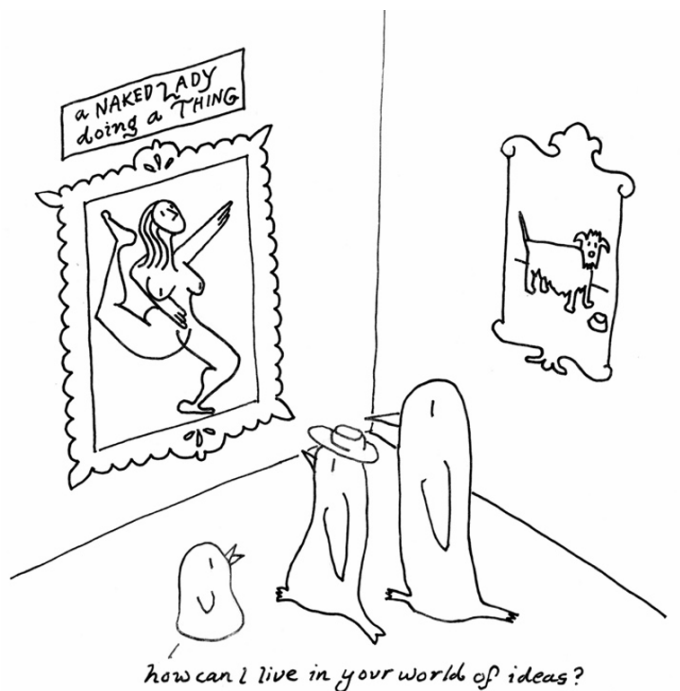
you—so many planes
above the cloud line
carrying strangers
either closer or

farther away from
one another while
you and I remain
grounded...

Timothy Liu, "Holding Pattern"

Holding Patterns was written for David Kaplan, who suggested a dialogue with the work of Chris Cerrone as a starting point. Taking the opening four notes from the second movement of Chris' piano concerto, the initial gesture expands, glides, and revolves, sometimes getting blown off course before returning to its point of origin. New patterns emerge, as do melodies embedded within their shifting accents. The second movement's independent layers are in a state of perpetual drift, until they finally snap together with magnetized strings. The flowing patterns of the final section are rounded off and occasionally made unseen by the pedal, expanding and contracting with flurries of activity.

Timo Andres's *How can I live in your world of ideas?* began life as a movement in the two piano cycle *Shy and Mighty*, which I premiered and recorded with the composer when we were still students at Yale. The version for one piano becomes a kind of rhetorical showpiece, in which the individual pianist must render the rapid transition between material played by two opposing, often interruptive, pianists. Each of the two pianists (in this case imaginary) take turns representing the titular subject "I," and the "World of Ideas," in which it's evidently problematic to "live." We don't really know which is which, though: am "I" the funky backdrop, the outbursts of passagework, or the reposeful romantic musings high up on the keyboard? While Chopin's *Polonaise-Fantasy* gets a brief star turn in the form of an extravagant trill, it is more the general idea of past music that is referenced, rather than specific works. The inscrutable title of the work comes from an equally inscrutable cartoon which Timo drew as a youngster (see below):



Kaija Saariaho writes the following regarding her intense, volatile, yet limpid *Ballade*, which she composed for the eminent pianist Emanuel Ax:

In this short piece I wanted to write music with a melody that grows out of the texture before descending into it again; a work that constantly shifts from a complex, multi-layered texture to concentrated single lines and back again.

Why *Ballade*? Manny asked specifically for a piece bearing this title, and I wrote it for him in July 2005.

Going back to its roots in the music of Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, and other romantics, the ballade genre combines improvisation with the cyclic structure of narrative poetry. Saariaho's contribution to the genre connects especially to the improvisatory element, like an ecstatic oration from an otherworldly deity.

If earlier on tonight's program Timo asks "How...?", Robert Schumann, in this piece from *Fantasiestücke, Op. 12*, asks "Why," or... "Warum?", like a child interrogating the stars. My performance in no way presumes to answer either composer.

Ludwig van Beethoven was a hell of an improviser at the keyboard, even by admission of those who disliked his playing, and in the two *Sonatas Op. 27, "quasi una fantasia,"* he applies improvisational principles to compositional process. The contemplative mood of the "Moonlight" Sonata's dreamy opening aria is well known, as is the stormy affect of its finale; but the *Moonlight's* sibling *Sonata in E-flat Major* is much less famous. On the surface, it appears to be a pastiche of disjointed bagatelles—but this humility of content belies boldness in form.

A confession: not everything you will hear tonight under the banner of Beethoven's Sonata will actually be by Beethoven (gasp!); especially given the theme of tonight's program, I take the "quasi una fantasia" subtitle as a mandate to fantasize a bit in the interstices between movements, as Beethoven himself often did in the cadences of his works, however much it annoyed his colleagues.