

MEDITATIONS ON DEATH AND LIFE: in darkness, there is light

18 February 2006

Without an object on which light can fall we see only darkness. Light itself is always invisible.

Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light*

You can't have a light without a dark to stick it in.

Arlo Guthrie

The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come.

At the darkest moment comes the light.

Joseph Campbell

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to the night.

Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"

This evening's concert spans 400 years of music—from the Dutch Baroque composer Jan Sweelinck's *Variations on "Mein junges Leben hat ein End;"* through Johannes Brahms's *Chorale Prelude: O Gott, du frommer Gott;* through two passionately-philosophical (although sharply-contrasting) works written by Benjamin Britten and Silvestre Revueltas during the Spanish Civil War; to several works from the end of the twentieth century—employing musical styles ranging from mariachi and New Orleans jazz to Indian- and African-inspired aesthetics. Images of darkness and light are prevalent in Western literature—this evening's concert explores their prevalence as metaphors of death and life in Western art music.

This evening's concert is dedicated to the memory of two wind ensemble luminaries: Warren Benson (1924-2005) and Frederick Fennell (1914-2004).

*There really aren't any pop songs about death—not good ones, anyway.
Maybe that's why I like pop music, and why I find classical music a bit creepy.*

Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity*

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck: *Variations on "Mein junges Leben hat ein End"* (transcribed by Ramon Ricker)

If this evening's concert is, from one perspective, a sequence of variations on a theme, it seems fitting that the program should begin with a set of variations. *Mein junges Leben hat ein End, D 48/N 6*, based on a German tune, is undoubtedly the best-known set of secular-melody keyboard variations of the Dutch composer and keyboardist **Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck** (1562-1621). The melody, popular in Sweelinck's day, is a lament for lost youth:

My young life is at an end, as are also my joy and suffering;

let my poor soul leave my body quickly.

My life can no longer stand (proudly with strength),

it is weak and must pass away

and along with all my suffering.

As the melody was likely unknown in the Low Countries in the early 17th century, Frits Noske (editor of Sweelinck's keyboard works) conjectures that Sweelinck was made aware of the melody by one of his students—an appropriate situation since most of Sweelinck's compositions are now known through the copies made by his students.

Sweelinck was not only a leading composer of vocal and keyboard music, but he was also a famous organist and one of the most influential and sought-after teachers of his time. From his early youth until his death, he lived in Amsterdam, employed as the organist of the Oude Kerk for over forty years; in fact, Sweelinck,

never left the Low Countries during his entire life, and he was never away from Amsterdam for more than a few days at a time. He was known for his organ and harpsichord improvisations: more than once the proud city authorities brought important visitors to the church to hear the “Orpheus of Amsterdam.”

Sweelinck was the last and most important composer of the musically-rich golden era of the Netherlands. He is no longer seen as the lone north European giant of his time, but rather as a gifted craftsman and musician who was the equal of his European contemporaries; his immediate influence can be seen in the music of Samuel Scheidt and Anthoni van Noordt. His surviving output amounts to 254 vocal works, including 33 chansons, 19 madrigals, 39 motets and 153 psalms, as well as about 70 instrumental works, principally in the form of fantasias, echo fantasias, toccatas and variations. Apart from a few undistinguished pieces for lute, Sweelinck’s instrumental music is entirely for keyboard instruments and reveals a thorough knowledge of all the major keyboard traditions of his time, especially the English and the Venetian. Although his keyboard music was not published during his life, it enjoyed wide circulation through the numerous copies made by his pupils. Many works have probably been lost, but those that survive clearly demonstrate his genius.

As Randall Tollefsen and Pieter Dirksen write:

Sweelinck was attracted to variation form, in which the style of his music points clearly to the English virginalists, some of whom, notably Bull and Philips, were among his acquaintances. His variation cycles tend to form ordered units and are not a random selection of individual variations. The settings of secular melodies are characterized by the development in each variation of a new musical idea derived from the theme, which thereby often undergoes major alterations or is subjected to ornamentation.

While the date of his *Variations on “Mein junges Leben hat ein End”* is unknown, it is commonly regarded as his masterwork of the variation form. After a simple setting of the melody (the simplicity returns in the final verse), the variations increase in complexity, each variation line-by-line exploiting different rhythmic, textural, and/or contrapuntal ideas. Interestingly (and perhaps to achieve a heightened sense of symmetry), Sweelinck alters the form of the melody by repeating the second half of the theme in each of the variations. The transcription of Sweelinck’s *Mein junges Leben* by Ramon Ricker, Senior Associate Dean for Professional Studies and Professor of Saxophone at the Eastman School of Music, is notable for several reasons. First, he includes a statement of the theme-proper (without variation); while most performances of *Mein junges Leben* begin with Sweelinck’s first variation, Ricker has decided to feature “his” instrument (the soprano saxophone) in a duet with vibraphone (eventually joined by three unison horns) to discretely present the unadorned theme. In addition, Ricker’s transcription deftly achieves a wide range of color through the use of small chamber sonorities, principally of families of instruments (even extending the flute family with the use of the alto flute) and less-traditional wind ensemble instruments (such as the harp and celeste, featured in the fourth variation); not until the finale are all of the instrumental forces employed in *tutti* realization of the theme.

Benjamin Britten: *Russian Funeral* (1936)

All a poet can do is warn.

English poet Wilfred Owens (1893-1918)
(epigraph to Britten’s *War Requiem*)

Along with Sir Michael Tippett, English composer and conductor **Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) was the dominant figure in English art music during the central half of the twentieth century As Philip Brett writes:

An exceedingly practical and resourceful musician, Britten worked with increasing determination to recreate the role of leading national composer held during much of his own life by Vaughan Williams, from whom he consciously distanced himself. Notable among his musical and professional achievements are the revival of English opera, initiated by the success of *Peter Grimes* in 1945; the building of institutions to ensure the continuing viability of musical drama; and outreach to a wider audience, particularly children, in an effort to increase national musical literacy and awareness. Equally important in this was his remaining accessible as a composer, rejecting the modernist ideology of evolution towards a “necessary” obscurity and developing a distinctive tonal language that allowed amateurs and professionals alike to love his work and to enjoy

performing and listening to it... Probably no subsequent British composer can have been entirely unaffected by his life and work, if not at a musical then at an organizational and operational level. He was a key figure in the growth of British musical culture in the second half of the 20th century, and his effect on everything from opera to the revitalization of music education is hard to overestimate.

Benjamin Britten wrote his only work for brass band, *Russian Funeral*, at the age of 22 in February 1936, the year in which the Spanish Civil War began. The march was conceived and completed in a phenomenally short time: Britten was thinking about how he might shape it on the afternoon of 24 February, finished a first complete sketch before dinner on the 27th, and delivered a fair full score to his copyist before lunch on 2 March.

After relocating to London in the early 1930s, Britten began moving in left-wing artistic and intellectual circles where a somewhat idealized view of Stalin's Soviet Union prevailed. He attempted to keep up with the likes of his new friend (and frequent future collaborator) W.H. Auden by reading Marx in early 1936—"hard going, though edifying" was his summary. Pacifism, however, came more naturally to him than activism. In his 1936 diary, the composer referred to *Russian Funeral* as "War and Death," a title which reflects not only his pacifist ideals (which would find artistic expression frequently during his career, not the least being his *War Requiem*), but also his admiration for those among the international community who sacrificed their lives in the struggle against the rise of Fascism in Europe. *Russian Funeral* is, in effect, a short but substantial symphonic poem for brass and percussion—a novel conception. Britten-scholar Donald Mitchell labels *Russian Funeral* as "semi-political" in connection with Britten's work because:

there was always a necessary ambiguity about his commitment to anti-Fascist politics in the thirties. By that I do not mean that his politics lacked conviction, sincerity, or courage. But the joker in the pack, if one may so describe it, was his stubborn pacifism: he would go so far in opposing Fascism but certainly would not, could not, participate in or condone violence and war.... It is utterly characteristic that his *Russian Funeral* juxtaposed not War and *Glory*, but War and *Death*. Indeed it was as "War and Death" that Britten described his march when it was first performed.

The march is in a simple ABA construction, synthesizing the significant influences of Mahler and Shostakovich on the young composer: the broad Mahlerian funeral march ("Death") that opens *Russian Funeral* frames—and in its reprise is infiltrated by—a central scherzo-like military dance ("War") with pre-echoes of the combative bugle fanfares of the *War Requiem* and *Owen Wingrave*. With its striking, formal dramatic scheme—the return of the Death section, on its recapitulation, can be heard as the only natural consequence of War—that must have gratified the realistically-minded, pacifist composer, *Russian Funeral* strikes a tone of compassion and frustration, not of martial strength and triumph. Mahler's influence can be felt not only in the powerful, anguished melodic pacing, but also in Britten's soloistic instrumental writing (about which Britten remarked in his diary, "[during the first performance] I suffered more exquisite agony than ever before owing to uncertainty of playing—I certainly have been a bit tactless in giving so thin a texture for nervous players.") The influence of Shostakovich (ironically, Britten was called in the 1940s the "British Shostakovich") can be heard in the militant, contrapuntal trumpet writing in "War," as well as in the "Russianness" of the melodic material. (As Mitchell cleverly observes, "*Russian Funeral*, in juxtaposing two models of particular importance for Britten, also neatly places Shostakovich alongside one of his principal models, Mahler, who proves to be one the more important links between Shostakovich and Britten.") The main theme of the somber "Death" march is a Russian Revolutionary funeral song, "Vi zhertvoyu pali" ("You fell as a victim"), the words of which glorify those who gave their lives for the Revolutionary cause. It was played at the funeral that followed the massacre of the demonstrators who assembled outside the Winter Palace in January 9, 1905 ("Bloody Sunday"); the melody was frequently utilized in Russian film scores (including Eisenstein's famous *Battleship Potyomkin*), and later actually used by Shostakovich himself as the main theme of the third movement of his Eleventh Symphony (1957). While the low brass melody during the "War" section has often been attributed to Britten himself, in a recent article entitled "*Russian funeral* through *Russian ears*," Ljudmila Kovnackaja, reveals that the melody is actually a well-known popular song from the communist organization KOMSOMOL in the former Soviet Union.

Russian Funeral was first performed in a London Labour Choral Union concert at the Westminster Theatre on March 8, 1936, conducted by Alan Bush. This evening's performance is conducted by **Benjamin Wood '08**.

Peter Racine Fricker: *Sinfonia*, op. 76 (1977)

During World War II English music had been dominated by the pastoral folksong tradition and composers such as Vaughan Williams, Holst, and Delius; by the end of the war, a shift in the dominant style occurred, and now composers Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, and **Peter Racine Fricker** (1920-1990; a descendant of the French playwright Jean Racine) were poised to usher in the new voice. Fricker's music owed very little to folksong; while he admitted to having decided at the age of 14 to become a composer after hearing a performance of Berg's *Wozzeck*, Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, as well as Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony, his early mentors were not the English pastoralists, but instead Berg and Schoenberg, Hindemith and Bartók, his Morley College composition teacher Mátyás Seiber, and Stravinsky. Fricker's early music was predominantly instrumental and densely chromatic, displaying an assured grasp of large-scale formal processes and a rigorous intellectual drive, while always primarily concerned with form and logic. In fact, as musicologist Michael Meckna has noted, even from his earliest works, "two important aspects of Fricker's style are a great profusion of thematic material and a careful consideration of texture;" Meckna also adds that "rhythmic vitality and seriousness...are characteristic of his music," and his "feeling for harmony was indeed one of the most sophisticated aspects of his style." He never entirely abandoned the structural resources of tonality, even if some of some of his pieces abound with striking dissonances (tritones, major sevenths, and minor ninths were prevalent); even when his language suggests the use of 12-tone technique, Fricker seemed to view serialism more as a dispensable tool, rather than a dogmatic method:

Although I use rows (usually short) in a serial way, I feel free to change anything. Having a mathematical mind, I'm fascinated by numbers. Sometimes I serialize rhythm, rarely dynamics; at times I write ostinato canons somewhat in the manner of Messiaen. Serialism, however, is only one part of my thinking. I try to be aware of what is idiomatic for the instruments I'm writing for, and sometimes serialist writing isn't.

As Meckna is quick to add, "Fricker has been remarkably consistent in his style, neither joining the dodecaphonic trend in the 1950s nor the experimental or aleatoric music of the 1960s, although he has absorbed techniques freely to enrich his own musical language. However, his style has evolved in the direction of leanness, ...and the resulting thinner texture has allowed the rich, condensed quality of his music to be more clearly expressive." In fact, Fricker's music is, when compared to his English contemporaries, most notable for its "capacity for controlled vehemence." In all, Fricker wrote over 100 works—primarily chamber and orchestra works, and including many pieces for solo piano, piano duo, or organ solo.

His quick rise to fame was recognition not only of his individual and highly developed language, but also of a general desire to rejoin a European tradition. Both in Britain and abroad his music gained awards and performances: in 1947 the *Wind Quintet* won the A.J. Clements Prize; in 1949 the *Prelude, Elegy and Finale* was first heard at the Darmstadt summer courses and the *Symphony no.1* received the Koussevitzky Prize; in 1950 this work had its première at the Cheltenham Festival and the *First Quartet* was performed at the ISCM Festival; in 1951 the *Violin Concerto no.1* won the Arts Council Festival of Britain Competition for Young Composers and the *Second Symphony* was commissioned for the Liverpool Festival; and in 1952 the Edinburgh Festival commissioned the *Viola Concerto*. He eventually received additional honors, including the Freedom of the City of London (1962) and the Order of Merit from the Federal Government of West Germany (1965).

In addition to composing, from 1955-1964 Fricker taught composition at the Royal College of Music (ironically, since when Fricker was demobilized from the Royal Air Force in 1945, after four years as an intelligence officer in India, he was refused readmission to RCM since he had already spent four years there before enlisting), and from 1952-1964 he was the director of Morley College (where he had studied with Seiber). In 1964, though, Fricker escaped these administrative duties, accepting a one-year appointment as visiting professor of music at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He found the circumstances there

so congenial that in the next year he accepted a full-time appointment as professor of music. While maintaining strong ties with English musical life (e.g. serving as president of the Cheltenham Festival, 1984–6), he remained in Santa Barbara for the remainder of his professional life, as chairman of the music department (1970–74), faculty research lecturer (1980) and Corwin Professor of Composition (1988).

In a 1981 interview with Lewis Foreman, Fricker remarked, "I'm a *little* bit on the conservative side of the line that divides it from the avant-garde.... I don't regard myself as somebody who wants to break down the past—I can make very much use of the past." In his early years of creative maturity, Fricker worked largely in traditional forms: three- and four-movement designs for concerti and symphonies, finding inventive uses of sonata and rondo forms, etc. By the mid-1960s, though, he began to break free (if only in deed, not in name) of the conservative molds; for example, his Symphony no. 4, op. 43 is in a single movement whose ten sections bear little relation to the conventional four-movement design. Its multiplicity of tempos is mirrored in the mosaic-like character of the *Episodes* for piano, the *Rondeaux* for horn and orchestra, and the **Sinfonia, op. 76 (1977)** for seventeen wind instruments. In general the more economical, linear textures of his later works show Fricker developing a style as concentrated as his early music was expansive.

In the span of ten years, Fricker wrote three "in memoriam" pieces: Symphony no. 4 (1966) for his teacher Mátyás Seiber; Sarabande for cello (1971, published in *Perspectives of New Music*) upon the death of formal/rhythmic guru Igor Stravinsky; and Sinfonia, op. 76 (1977), subtitled "In memoriam Benjamin Britten," and dedicated to his musical and nationalist compatriot. Remarking on his "In memoriam Seiber" symphony (but equally applicable to all three homages), Fricker wrote:

Music cannot, of course, give us a portrait in the literal sense; *Don Quixote* would be just a work of symphonic proportions if Strauss had not left us a detailed programme. But I have a strong suspicion that many so-called abstract pieces of music do in fact have a programme; certainly, many of my own works have the background of a programme, though in most cases I have no intention of revealing what the programme actually is. In the case of the Fourth Symphony, I repeat that the piece is intended to stand as a self-sustained work of symphonic dimensions.... That it is also a memorial to a wonderful musician and a much-loved friend is incidental.

Like the Fourth Symphony, **Sinfonia ("in memoriam Benjamin Britten")** was conceived as one-movement symphony in many sections, with "blocks" sharing thematic material in various transformations to create a musical mosaic. Although the tempo relationships are not as rigid, the form and expressive intent of the Sinfonia seems to strongly recall Stravinsky's wind ensemble homage to Debussy—Symphonies of Wind Instruments (1920). Fricker's tautly-structured ritual, however, has little of the religiosity or gravitas of Stravinsky's (or Revueltas's, for that matter) homage; instead the prevalent tone of Sinfonia—light and charming—is provided by a recurring lyric oboe phrase that lends the entire work the feeling of a dream, of a meditative fantasy. While Fricker did not provide a "detailed programme" for his Sinfonia, it is clear that he thought Britten a gentle man and a caring friend; the Sinfonia is fitting testament to their camaraderie.

Silvestre Revueltas: *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca* (1936)

When a man like Silvestre Revueltas
returns once and for all to the earth,
there's a rumbling, a surge
of voice and weeping which prepares and broadcasts his departure.

...

Be at rest, brother, this day of yours has ended,
with your gentle and powerful soul you fill yourself
with light brighter than the light of day
and with a sound blue as the voice of the sky.

...

Now are the stars of the America your homeland,
and from today on your house without doors is the earth.

Pablo Neruda (translated by Peter Garland)
"To Silvestre Revueltas, of Mexico, Upon His Death"

Though he was without question one of the most important figures of Mexican twentieth-century music, Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) remains practically unknown to this day—the “famous unknown composer”—more than sixty years after his death, his life shrouded in a host of uncertainty. Peter Garland, whose *In search of Silvestre Revueltas* (1991) is the definitive English-language biography of the composer, remarks:

We will probably have to wait until the next century to get a correct perspective on the musical history of this one. My opinion is that such a perspective will differ radically from the one that has been promulgated through the universities and academic scholarship since the 1940s; and that in such a corrected view, Silvestre Revueltas will figure as one of this century's greatest composers.

If Revueltas is underappreciated, it is likely for two reasons. First, that he died young, and thus, arguably, did not reach his full artistic potential. Leonard Bernstein—who knew Revueltas's music, having recorded his show-stopping *Sensemayá* with the New York Philharmonic—said as much, commenting that “Revueltas might have achieved true greatness had he lived.” However, Revueltas lived longer than both Mozart and Schubert, and, in a frenzied ten-year (1930-1940) burst of creativity, was astonishingly prolific, having written more than thirty pieces (including a half dozen film scores, several large orchestral scores, and numerous chamber ensemble works). To say that he did not live fully or “long enough” would seem to miss Revueltas's very nature.

The second, and more compelling, reason for Revueltas's “snub” is his thorny relationship with other established composers, most notably Carlos Chávez (and thus by extension, Aaron Copland and his generation of American musicians). Revueltas spent most of his formative years in the United States, studying and working in Chicago, New York, and Austin, but when Chávez summoned him to return to Mexico in 1929 to serve as assistant conductor of his Symphonic Orchestra of Mexico and to serve as violin professor at the Conservatory in Mexico City, Revueltas eagerly obliged. The early 1930s were a highpoint in Mexican arts and music—and Chávez and Revueltas were the two dynamic young leaders of this movement; both had a tremendous impact on Mexican music during this period, in similar capacities as composers, conductors, performers, teachers, and organizers. However, by 1935 Revueltas's and Chávez's friendship had entirely eroded: Revueltas resigned from both the Orchestra and from the Conservatory, and in an act of open rebellion, established the National Symphonic Orchestra in opposition to Chávez's “official” Mexican orchestra. That Revueltas and Chávez could not co-exist for long is hardly surprising in light of their antithetical aesthetic goals and interpretation of “Mexicanism.” As Sergio Fernández Bravo writes:

Chávez perceived Revueltas's compositions, whether or not they proved successes, as threats. Chávez's music, with a “Mexicanism” derived from folkloric melodies and rhythms, contrasted with the music of his colleague, whose “Mexicanism” seemed innate, unforced. Indeed, Revueltas, did not need to borrow popular themes to make the very essence of this music *feel* entirely Mexican. With *Planos*, *Caminos*, and his music for the film *Redes*, Revueltas, it seems, had gone too far.

Other critics agree, such as Benjamín Juárez Echenique, who adds:

Musically, the work of Chávez tries to recreate a Mexico without the original sin borne by European blood, or else it tries to imagine an ideal past like the one of Greek mythology.... His music radically denies traditional music structures, isolating itself in a spiral of grueling access. Revueltas's music starts from a more real and tangible Mexico, accepting the contradictory urban surroundings of its time. Nothing stays out of his vocabulary, not even the coarsest swear words, and it shows great ease in making fun of the refined, scholarly or cosmopolitan art.

Revueltas's relationship to Mexican traditional musics was spontaneous and deep, not studied or self-conscious as it often is in Chávez's work. He shared a sense of camaraderie with the music, heightened by his political ideals. For Revueltas, there were no class distinctions in music: music, life, and revolution (social and artistic) were not separable; the street music of the mariachis was as important a model as the Aztec or Anglo-American heritages. As Garland writes:

On simple musical terms, to ignore the popular traditions in Mexico would be to turn your back on everything around you. Those who have not spent time in Mexico are unaware of how intense, active and varied the popular musical culture is. It is everywhere, and itself represents a special synthesis of European and indigenous American elements which continue to inspire and influence ongoing generations of composers. As we know, Revueltas was alive and open to that musical world all around him. As a violinist, he could share empathy and understanding with classical virtuosos, and mariachi players from Jalisco. This big world of life and music brims over with energy in Revueltas's work. Like the best of the muralist painters, this art is intensely modern *and* traditional—but of a different tradition than the European. Like the dissonances in Revueltas's melodic and harmonic structure, these elements co-exist together in place and time.... The popular culture does not walk a humble distance behind the classical and appear only as quotation. They dance and clash with each other in complete simultaneity in Revueltas's music.

The execution by a Nationalist firing squad during the first weeks of the Spanish Civil War of the poet and playwright—and his close friend—Federico García Lorca was devastating to Revueltas. Committed to the socialist, nationalist cause in Spain, Revueltas believed the murder of Lorca to be senseless and emblematic of his perceived exclusion from the world. In *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca* (1936), Revueltas distills all his creative originality, with a brutal emotional directness not before heard in his music, into a succinct, dramatic outcry. Garland believes *Homenaje* to be Revueltas's greatest single effort, writing:

In the *Homenaje* Revueltas achieved some sort of leap that few other composers ever have—this music totally obliterates the boundaries of classical and popular musics. And it is almost as if the latter took control, fully, over the character of the music. Revueltas came close to this many times, but never so movingly and desperately as in this piece. The piece sings like a Mexican mariachi (of old days), and sounds as if it were torn from his heart.... This is music reduced to radical simplicity, stripped bare to that point by the intensity of Revueltas's creative emotion.

The first movement (*Baile*) is a dance—but what a dance it is. A strikingly dissonant chord interrupts the silence, out of which a simple (perhaps chant- or folksong-based?) trumpet cry emerges. What seems like a modern nocturne—a serious homage—is immediately set on its head; as Tim Page describes it: "...but then there is an unexpected 'bump' and we are thrown into a bright, whirling riot of sound, blinding and breathtaking, a brilliantly controlled chaos, a multiplicity stripped to essentials. *This is Revueltas.*" The second movement (*Duelo*) may be the Mexican equivalent of Ives's *Unanswered Question*: a solo trumpet seems to pose irresolvable questions (why are the finest voices of Spanish culture—Lorca—senselessly murdered?) over a stagnant, eerily-"ticking" ostinato; after an overwhelming outburst, the solo trumpet again asks its lamenting question, still with no answer. When the final movement (*Son*, a traditional Mexican form) finally bursts through, all of the emotion that has been so carefully controlled is released. The movement bristles with schizophrenic (manic? drunk?) energy to create a mariachi collage, ending in near riotous euphoria. If Sergio Fernández Bravo's description of what it means to be Mexican—"the constant wavering between solemnity and crudeness, between living life to its fullest and mocking death"—is accurate, then perhaps no more Mexican piece is there than Revueltas's *Homage*. Garland agrees, writing:

One thing that has puzzled people about this work (especially its ending) is its apparently joyful and energetic character, given that it is an homage (and lament) to a recently murdered poet. To understand this one must appreciate the Mexican (and Spanish) attitude toward death, which is really an attitude toward life. Life must be lived intensely, today—danced in the face of the knowledge of death. Thus death makes one free, to live fully.... Certainly Silvestre Revueltas lived this dance with death himself. It is a sign of his powerful humanism that his *Homenaje* is so joyful and courageous—in many ways it is a deeply sorrowful work, even at its most impassioned moments.

The last four years of Revueltas's life (including a 1937 concert tour of Spain, where his music was enthusiastically received at many of the Nationalist strongholds—during which his revolutionary idealism was inflamed, but then crushed as he saw Spain in defeat and ruins) were torturous for him. His life began to fall apart and he teetered between the heights of intense creative activity and the depths of self-destructive despair. His music was as powerful, or more so, than ever—but there is an element of darkness and sadness to it previously absent. Feeling life an oppressive weight, Revueltas commented upon seeing a Van Gogh exhibit:

I don't believe his self-portraits are of himself. His face reflects the anxiety of all mankind, and he studies human sadness with a sad passion in his own face. His self-portraits hold no vanity. Death invades each one slowly, with no mercy.... Only his eyes stay audacious, inquisitive, tortured. I contemplated with anxiety this figure of a man who seemed to be alive in the silence of the room. I felt his presence. I felt his anxiety, his sadness, his strength, inside me, as if they were my own.

And like Van Gogh, Revueltas would see the insides of insane asylums, institutionalized for acute alcoholism before dying of pneumonia caused by his alcoholism in 1940.

Sadness and pain hide and at the same time shout their hope with fearful or clearly begging glances. Looks that leave a track behind the closed door. Hopes lock themselves to spend the night. Hourless night. Only the schedule of pain is our guide. Only shadows mark the minutes. Silence. Only silence hears a heart that shouts without a sound. Only silence listens to a death rattle and a howl that remain within the body, without emerging. Sometimes not even the wind. Sometimes only a shadow silently passes by. And the night, totally night. Without end.

...

My career is over, and now it is a matter of making myself known. That will come in time. I am in no hurry. It will come, even if I am dead.

Revueltas (in 1940)

Johannes Brahms: Chorale Prelude: "O Gott, du frommer Gott" from *Eleven Chorale Preludes*, op. 122 (1896)

Most listeners and musicians probably do not think of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) as a composer of organ music; the works that first come to mind are generally his symphonies, concerti, piano works, songs, and chamber music—or even perhaps the *German Requiem*. However, the very last compositions that Brahms, perhaps sensing his own impending death, wrote seem to affect a conscious closure to his career. His *Vier ernste Gesänge* ("Four Serious Songs"), op. 121, confronted the mysteries of death, life, and love as presented in Biblical texts. While his close friend Clara Schumann suffered from the lingering effects of a stroke, Brahms finished this collection of songs for low voice and piano on his (final, as it turned out) birthday, May 7, 1896; Clara, the last remaining confidante of the semi-reclusive composer, died on May 20. Ill, Brahms produced one last work, returning to an instrument he had not written for in over thirty years, to write a set of eleven chorale preludes for organ, published posthumously as opus 122 in 1902. This collection is doubly retrospective, returning both to beloved Lutheran chorale tunes from his youth and to quasi-Baroque counterpoint mingled with Romantic harmonies. Writing in 1931, Archibald Farmer describes these pieces as "the communings of the soul..., a personal confession;" Ann Bond, writing forty years later, develops Farmer's interpretation:

Introspection, retrospection, valediction—all these words come spontaneously to mind in describing this work. Consciously or unconsciously, Brahms was setting the seal of finality on his output: and his last two works are full of the awareness of mortality. The *Four Serious Songs*...are a meditation on the human condition and the finality of death. Likewise the texts of at least six of the Chorale Preludes deal with the approach of death. [Translations by Frances Browne of the texts for the first, penultimate, and final stanzas of "O Gott, du frommer Gott" are below.] Brahms's attitude was, of course, more complex and "Romantic" than the simple longing for death expressed so eloquently in Bach's cantatas. He yearned for peace, even in oblivion, but lacked Bach's straightforward faith: and the mask of stoicism—not particularly well-suited to his temperament—with which he aimed to confront the fact of death was not always strong enough to protect his vulnerable self.

In 1995, John Boyd, director of bands at Indiana State University, and Frederick Fennell, founder in 1952 of the Eastman Wind Ensemble (the first dedicated wind ensemble in the United States), collaborated on a transcription of three of the *Eleven Chorale Preludes* of Brahms. While Ricker strove to create a new, highly colorful adaptation of the Sweelinck, Boyd and Fennell are much more faithful to the sound of Brahms's original—their transcription treats the wind ensemble as a surrogate organ, attempting, as nearly as possible, to recreate the sound of the organ with the instruments of the modern wind band. No. 7, "O Gott, du frommer Gott" ("O God, you righteous God") seems to lend itself especially well to the wind adaptation.

Oh God, you righteous god
you source of good gifts,
without whom nothing exists that does exist,
from whom we have everything :
give me a healthy body
and grant that in such a body
there may remain an inviolate soul
and a pure conscience.

At my end let me
depart relying on Christ's death,
take my soul to you
to your joys in heaven,
bestow a little space on my body,
a grave by my parents,
so that it may have peace
by their side.

On that day
when you will awaken the dead,
then stretch out your hand
to my grave,
let me hear your voice,
and awaken my body
and lead it beautiful and transformed
to the multitude of your chosen people

Dana Wilson: "Being" from *Piece of Mind* (1987)

Piece of Mind (1987), a musical pun on an old expression, is a representation of the workings of the human mind. While the music of **Dana Wilson** (b. Lakewood, OH, 1946) displays a fusion between classical and jazz idioms, in *Piece of Mind*, Wilson incorporates an even broader palate of non-traditional techniques, including East Indian classical music and minimalist-like repetitive constructions. As Wilson has written (in a pedagogic essay entitled "Guidelines for Coaching Student Composers," 2001), "In music composition, as in life, we desire both order and change, unity and variety. The composer's challenge is to invite the listener into a provocative sound world, establish patterns that provide order and unity, and periodically send the material in unexpected directions so that the listener's interest is sustained." Tonight, the Symphonic Winds will perform "Being," the fourth and final movement (the first three being "Thinking," "Remembering," and "Feeling") of *Piece of Mind*; according to Wilson, "Being" "addresses a mental state that is rarely considered in our culture. Non-Western musical styles are called upon to shape the four-note motive [present in all four movements] so as to celebrate this piece (peace) of mind." Thus, while Wilson clearly adopts a quasi-minimalist stance in "Being," through his active processes of layering and the incorporation of non-western stylistic elements, he is also able to provide the wanted "unity and variety"—while trying to capture the meditative paradox of stillness in motion, stasis in activity. *Piece of Mind* was awarded the 1987 Sudler International Wind Band Composition Prize (administered by the John Philip Sousa Foundation) and the 1988 Ostwald Prize (from the American Bandmasters Association).

Wilson is currently Charles A. Dana Professor of Music in the School of Music at Ithaca College, where he teaches theory, composition, and jazz. His primary teachers include Samuel Adler and Hale Smith, and he holds a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music. He is co-author of *Contemporary Choral Arranging*, published by Prentice Hall/Simon and Schuster, and has written articles on diverse musical subjects. He has been a Fellow at Yaddo (the artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York) a Wye Fellow at the Aspen Institute, a Charles A. Dana Fellow, and a Fellow at the Society for Humanities, Cornell University; also, he has received grants from, among others, the National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, New England Foundation for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, Arts Midwest, and Meet the Composer. He has written solo works for such renowned artists as hornist Gail Williams, clarinetist Larry Combs, trumpeter James Thompson, and oboist David Weiss; in addition, his works have been commissioned and performed by such diverse ensembles as the Chicago Chamber Musicians, Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings, Buffalo Philharmonic, Memphis Symphony, Washington military bands, Netherlands Wind Ensemble, Syracuse Symphony, and Tokyo Kosei Wind Orchestra—in fact, the Symphonic Winds has joined a consortium (along with the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Drury High School in North Adams, and eighteen other schools) to commission Wilson for a piece which will be premiered during the next academic year. His compositions have been performed throughout the United States, Europe, and East Asia. They have received several awards, including the International Trumpet Guild First Prize, the Sudler International Composition Prize, and the Ostwald Composition Prize.

David Maslanka: *Golden Light: A Celebration Piece* (1990)

I want to give a few thoughts on the roots of music and its purpose in human life.

Music comes supposedly from the human heart and mind. These are but two of the vibratory receiving centers of the human organism. The human organism comes from Planet Earth. We say "from dust to dust." Each body is built from the elements of Earth and is continually recycling elements from the Earth. We eat food every day. To what end? So that we have "energy". To what end? To have feelings and ideas, to make music, and to make many other things. Bodies are fluid, recycling every seven years, so that each of us experiences a continual interaction with Mother Earth. The source of music then, would seem to be the Earth. We come from the Earth; if we are intelligent and spiritual, then the Earth is intelligent and spiritual, and by extension, the universe is intelligent and spiritual. If the Earth is the seed, then all that we see around us is the flowering and unfolding of that seed. And all of it is in continuous, fluid, interactive motion.

Music is one voice of the Earth, and by extension, one voice of the universe. That voice rises up through this wonderful human body – a body made of cells, cells made of molecules, molecules made of atoms, atoms made of neutrons, protons, electrons, electrons made of pure energy. As you look closer and closer, matter literally disappears. It disappears into profound emptiness and silence, the "nothingness" which is not nothing, and out of which the universe has blossomed. This silence is the source of the music. So, what happens is this: Your "nothingness" receives my "nothingness"; the medium of transmission is vibrations in the air. Why do we make music? So that the creative power of the universe can rise up through us out of the "nothing." The experience opens us so that we can listen to the voice of silence in ourselves, and be moved by it in the unfolding of our lives.

David Maslanka, 15 November 1992
pre-concert remarks, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

Now living in Missoula, Montana, **David Maslanka** (b. Bedford, MA, 1943) is a free-lance composer who has written extensively for the wind ensemble medium, including *Tears* (performed by the Symphonic Winds in February 2003), *A Child's Garden of Dreams* (based on the writing of Jung), a Mass, and several symphonies. He has served on the faculties of the State University of New York at Geneseo, Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, and Kingsborough College of the City University of New York. He has received three National Endowment for the Arts grants, five MacDowell Colony fellowships, and grants from the State University of New York Research Foundation, the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the American Society for Composers, Authors and Publishers. Maslanka studied clarinet at the New England Conservatory as a high school student; he later attended the Oberlin College Conservatory (B.M. 1965) where he studied composition with Joseph Wood and clarinet with George Waln. After spending a year at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, he pursued graduate studies at Michigan State University (M.M. 1968, Ph.D. 1971), studying composition with H. Owen Reed (whose *La Fiesta Mexicana* will be performed by the Symphonic Winds on May 12, 2006).

Maslanka's musical style is characterized by Romantic gestures, a tonal harmonic language, and clearly articulated large-scale structures. He views Bach's chorales as a sort of "touchstone": not only does he begin each day playing several chorales at the piano, but numerous of his works have been inspired by the elegance and powers of these seemingly simple pieces. When asked by saxophonist Russell Peterson to describe his method of composition, Maslanka revealed his metaphysical process by responding:

...many composers disregard simple ideas because they seem too simple and they seem kind of dumb. If you have an idea which goes (singing) "do-sol-me", that's in about ten thousand pieces already! But if an idea like that strikes me really hard it will have a particular glow to it. The notes and the rhythms may be simple, and the pitches unexceptional in any way, and yet they will have about them a glow, which says there is something here underneath all that. And when I get an idea like that that has a simple shape, simple contour, simple rhythm, but it has a glow, it is telling me that it has a whole world of feeling that that idea is covering. And then it's my work to move into that idea, move down deeply into the simple thing and to find out what's happening here. So it's a matter of just letting the mind open up wide and receiving onto paper everything that comes out. It becomes a sorting process at a certain point. This goes here, this goes here, this belongs to this piece and so on, so you end up with piles of paper that you're elaborating a bit at a time.

Maslanka once described his *Symphony No. 4* (1994) as “the spontaneous rise of the impulse to shout for the joy of life”—a description equally apt for his *Golden Light*, commissioned by the South Shore Conservatory in 1990 and premiered by the SSC Senior Wind Ensemble, Malcolm W. Rowell, Jr., conductor. Maslanka offers the following comments about *Golden Light*

I lived for many years in upper Manhattan – one block from the A train. One block the other way was Inwood Hill Park, a beautiful “wild” place that still contained old growth trees. It was there that I did my walking meditations. “Golden Light” refers to the quality of late afternoon sunlight that could be seen through the trees as I walked. It was a delicious “green-gold” color. My walking meditations are inward journeys that I use to find the impulse for a piece of music. In the meditation for this piece I was taken to the coast of Africa. It was a summer night and a community of people was engaged in a lively song and dance fest. I was allowed to join in. The dance rhythms and the joyous quality of the singing became the push for my music.

Golden Light is not African music, but the small, repetitive bits of tunes, the call-and-response patterns, and the layers of independent rhythms give it a distinctly African feel. It is a very difficult piece to perform because it asks each player to be rhythmically independent much of the time – each person contributing his or her separate voice to make the joyful sound of the community at play.

Warren Benson: *Dawn's Early Light* (1987)

Called “one of America’s most interesting composers—a composer with genuinely original ideas” by the Toledo Blade, Warren Benson (1924-2005) was a self-taught composer known primarily for his song cycles and his works for wind ensemble/band. Promoting the idea that even the most renowned musicians must be, in part, responsible for the education of young musicians, Benson was active in initiating the Ford Foundation’s Comprehensive Music Project in the 1960s (he was the author of the influential *Creative Projects in Musicianship*); supporting his belief that music education “begins with literature—there is no other place to start, without that there is nothing,” Benson wrote numerous pieces for bands of all skill levels. Upon their 200th anniversary, the U.S. Marine Band issued a compact disc set with accompanying essays on wind band literature; Benson’s compositions were described as “among the most important of this century.” In a 1978 dissertation by Acton Osterling entitled “An Evaluation of Compositions for Wind Band According to Specific Criteria of Serious Artistic Merit,” fourteen works of Benson’s were included—more than any other composer. Among his most influential pieces are: *Solitary Dancer*, *The Leaves are Falling*, *Symphony No. 2—Lost Songs*, and *Variations on a Handmade Theme* (performed the Symphonic Winds, May 2003). He was elected to the National Band Association Academy of Excellence and the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame, and was a founding member of the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles. In short, then, Benson’s contributions to the wind band have been immeasurably significant.

Benson was largely self-taught in composition, finding inspiration in jazz and poetry. He wrote over 150 works, including pieces that have been heralded as masterpieces of the twentieth century; his music has been played and recorded worldwide by ensembles such as the Kronos Quartet, the New York Choral Society, the International Horn Society, and the United States Marine Band. He studied music theory at the University of Michigan (B.M. 1949, M.M. 1951), where he played horn in the orchestra and concurrently taught percussion and was timpanist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (beginning in 1946, while still an undergraduate). He later received Fulbright Teaching Fellowships (teaching for two years at Anatolia College in Salonica, Greece), served residencies at the MacDowell Colony, and won awards such as a John Simon Guggenheim Composer Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts composer commissions and the Diploma de Honor from the Republic of Argentina. For fourteen years (1953-1967) Benson was Professor of percussion and composition at Ithaca College, where he organized the first percussion ensemble on the East Coast. In all, Benson’s teaching career spanned over fifty years, culminating with honors including the Kilbourn Professorship for Distinguished Teaching, and appointment as University Mentor and Professor Emeritus at the Eastman School of Music, where he was Professor of Composition from 1967-1993.

Benson’s music has been described in such evocative terms as: witty, pensive, playful, reverent, eloquent, beautiful, delicately colored, shimmering, and iridescent; it has been praised for combining a “sinewy sparseness with a pervasive concern for lyricism in compositions that are varied, selective, and non-doctrinaire in their technique and style.” Wilma Salisbury, music critic of the Cleveland Plain Dealer,

describes Benson's music as "undeniably 'romantic,' generally a word of condemnation in regard to new music. But Benson's romanticism, free from maudlin sentiment and embarrassment, is a welcome expression of something true-felt and communicated in contemporary terms." Speaking with more technical terminology, composers Daniel Godfrey and Elliot Schwartz describe Benson's music as "an 'inclusive' music, encompassing tonality, free atonality, serialism, ethnic elements, and other strains. At times one of them may predominate, at others they may intermingle; throughout, however, the material is very much of Benson's creation rather than derivative of others." While these myriad descriptions and labels are all, to some degree, accurate, Benson himself explained his compositional intentions when he wrote:

I am interested by the idea that music doesn't have to be beautiful but, rather, humanely communicative in terms of the whole range of human experience. If the musical environment is going to reflect the human condition, then the vibrato, dynamics, varieties of articulations, control of tempi, etc., must be pushed to their fullest potential.

Benson's *Dawn's Early Light*, commissioned by the United States Air Force Band (James M. Bankhead, Lt. Col., USAF Commander) was written in 1987 and premiered at the WASBE (World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles) conference in July of that year in Boston. In three movements (Cakewalk, Blues, and Procession) played without a pause (and without completely discrete formal boundaries) *Dawn's Early Light* is a third-stream tour-de-force, paying homage to the sounds and ideals of the New Orleans funeral bands of the first half of the twentieth century. In his *Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz* (1977), William Schafer describes the role of these jazz musicians in these unique funerals:

The musical funeral complemented the attitude toward death in the black community—rounding out a ceremonial farewell, a celebration of life as much as a recognition of the triumph of death. Rejoicing was basic to the funeral, but it was not impromptu or undignified rejoicing. The celebration tried to show that "death is swallowed up in victory," that the end of life is not despair but hope in the resurrection. The band's role remained that of leading the procession, providing solemn music for marching, and playing religious music en route. The brass band dominated the ceremony emotionally. Its loud, mournful strains carried further in open air and were more persuasive than singing. The military element—muffled snare drum; dull, tolling bass drum in dirges; the wailing quality of wind instruments playing minor-key music—created an impressive, exalted drama. New Orleans funerals were leisurely public acts, theatrical displays designed not to hide burial as a fearful obscenity, but to exhibit it as a community act, the social obligation of friends and family. The brass music with the cortege heralded the procession, published the fact of death and celebrated it. Whatever mythology attached to the return parade, it was famous for spontaneous celebration and impromptu community dancing with the street bands.

William "Baby" Dodds, one of the most famous New Orleans drummers, explained in his memoirs (1959):

Of course, we played other numbers coming back from the funerals. We'd play the same popular numbers that we used to play with dance bands. And the purpose was this: As the family and people went to the graveyard to bury one of their loved ones, we'd play a funeral march. It was pretty sad, and it put a feeling of weeping in their hearts and minds and when they left there we didn't want them to hear that going home. It became a tradition to play jazzy numbers going back to make the relatives and friends cast off their sadness. And the people along the streets used to dance to the music.... The jazz played after New Orleans funerals didn't show any lack of respect for the person buried. It rather showed their people that we wanted them to be happy.

In *Dawn's Early Light*, Benson creates the haunting, overwhelming, quasi-surreal atmosphere of a New Orleans funeral. The work opens tentatively, the band beginning to warm-up and swing in a kind of stylized Cakewalk marked "tempo di groove," a terminology introduced to the music world by "Slim" Gaillard and "Slam" Stewart, noted guitar-double bass jazz duo of Benson's youth. The Cakewalk shuffles into a riff chorus, which is introduced by low flutes and piano, which gradually builds to a climax through the quasi-minimalist layering of motives and "licks" by the other instruments of the band. As the groove reaches its breaking point, a solemn and deliberate (hymn-like) dirge abruptly begins. Above this processional, muffled sobs are answered with the preachers' sermons—the blues emerge as solo instruments lament and wail. As quickly as the dirge began, though, the festive recessional erupts: the band and the mourners return home to the sounds of a rhythmically-intricate, gospel-inspired celebration—"death is swallowed up in victory, the end of life is not despair but hope in the resurrection."