

Review / Appreciation of Donald Bousted's '19.5' and dedication

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Appreciation posted on Facebook 25th May 2021

Last week, I received an email with a very nice surprise, and an honour: being included in the dedication of this amazing piece by Donald Bousted: '19.5'. Thank you Don, I'm very touched by this. Having listened a number of times—with fascination and much pleasure—I've been musing on Don's music, and I've written a little mini-appreciation of this new work, which I'll post as a comment below.

As he says, 20 years ago, Don was Composer-in-Residence for CNMI (Centre for New Musical Instruments). We were extremely fortunate to be able to appoint him—he not only produced some terrific pieces, he contributed some great research too. So, perhaps we are a little bit to blame for his passion for 19 divisions in the octave □ but not for the remarkable series of works and studies then, and the pieces that followed in the years since.

As I hear it, Don's music has evolved in a very moving way, since those early days. His musical voice has maintained its identity, but matured and deepened. I'm tempted to say it has outgrown and become independent of 'mainstream new music' (*), yet achieves a breadth, an understatement, intensity and concentration that are rare—and very welcome. This latest release—a piece for trumpet and malletKAT, lasting 57 minutes—is a big achievement, and contains some very beautiful and unusual music. It's humorous, ironic, sometimes biting, enigmatic, moving. But, somehow, I have a suspicion that many people don't really get it? So I've taken a few moments to say why I appreciate and value Don's music—and not only the dedication.

(*) 'Mainstream new music'. Did I say that? Is there still such a thing?

'19.5' comprises twelve movements, grouped into three Parts (of four pieces each): 'Modes', 'Poetry' and 'Spirit'. In the first two pieces of Part 1, the music has a playful, almost whimsical character that doesn't take itself too seriously. However, there is a melancholic/ironic tension lurking under the surface, albeit restrained, understated, reflective. Perhaps the melancholy tries to emerge in the third piece, but struggles to find a voice, unless it's one of despondency and resignation. Again, at the end of the fourth piece, where the trumpet tries briefly to assert itself, the attempt seems in vain.

I'm kind-of reminded of the comic (tragicomic) side of Beckett—but for me there's an objectivity in Don's music that always distinguishes it as Bousted. There's also a sort of dialectic here which takes advantage, I think, of the contrast between familiar and unfamiliar intervals which arise from dividing the octave into 19-divisions: thirds and sixths, fourths and fifths are all recognisable and relatively familiar; elsewhere our ears may be warped by the strange narrow semitones, the wide tones (and their various inverse sevenths), two different 'off-tritones', and so on. (It should be remembered that 19-divisions is an extended species of third comma mean-tone...)

In Part 2, the music really gets going. In 'Love You Hate You' (track 5) there's a painful dialogue between trumpet and percussion of mutually irritated time-points. It reminds me of some of Don's earlier music in which some rhythmic motor frequently drove the music on, but here the movement—and it's awkwardness—are more subtle, more pointed. There's also a lovely moment, right at the end of this stuttering, fractious duo, where the trumpet momentarily turns into a snare drum. In the next piece, 'She Goes', there is some extremely beautiful music, especially from circa 4 minutes in, a heartrending melody that speaks for itself. And shows how much can be said with limited forces and few notes. 'Life is about Life and Death and Death and Death and Death' start

outs and intermittently continues with some terrific canonic counterpoint which (considering the title) displays Don's cool sense of musical humour: dry and black. Perhaps this, and its ending, is a little bit Beckett too. In 'Walk in Straight Lines', perhaps someone is trying to (drunkenly?) extricate themselves from the above predicaments? Or is this some slightly inebriated circus music? Either way, I found myself enjoying all this a lot.

Perhaps the last four pieces in the cycle are the richest. I'm not sure, and I'll refrain from further 'extra-musical' commentary (I hope Don doesn't object to the metaphors above). But the story develops again, and I'd actually like to call Part 3 'Act 3'—because the leaps from one 'Act' to the next are considerable, almost suggesting (to me at least) a pared-down opera in which each act takes place 'a few years later'. I will draw attention, though, to my favourite movement 'what you believe will come true' (track 11) with its flavour of bell sonorities. And to the muted and strangely enigmatic intensity of the last movement.

In a sense, the whole of '19.5' is relatively simple, direct and approachable. Combined with the basic ontology of the materials employed, these qualities invite a certain kind of concentration, introspection, at once accessible yet demanding of our imagination. Such positive attributes are reinforced by the (mainly) short movements, themselves presented in smaller units that don't outstay their welcome. This is mature music, maturely considered.

But perhaps these notes tell you more about how I listen than about Don's music? (I didn't consult him before writing this!)

If you need post-romantic outburst and exultation; if you need to be impressed by hyper-invention or get turned-on by a certain kind of hyperactive new music fecundity; if your semitones must be exactly where they usually are, or your tritones split the octave down the middle... this music possibly isn't for you.(**) On the other hand, perhaps '19.5' is a true antidote to outworn habits...? [I'm thinking of myself as much as anyone...].

Congratulations Don, Steve and Lee. And again, thank you.

(**) Those remarks are not intended as barbs for anyone!

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