

Christopher James

SINFONIA CONCERTANTE

For Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, 2 Violins, Viola, Cello and Bass

(2004)

- I. Pesante - Allegro con fuoco (5'12")
- II. Adagio affettuoso - Più animato - Tempo primo (5'48")
- III. Variations (9'57")

The North/South Consonance Ensemble
Max Lifchitz, Conductor

Introduction and Notes

My Sinfonia Concertante for ten instruments was written at the request of Max Lifchitz to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the North/South Chamber Ensemble, and was completed in September, 2004. It marks a new direction in my work, and reflects a decision to distance myself from the tonal, neo-Romantic style I had cultivated for some twenty years, but without forsaking my aesthetic preferences. I found that thinking in terms of “tonal” and “atonal” was of no help to me, as these terms are even now imprecise and still used as polemical epithets freighted with value judgments. I have employed in this work as a substitute for tonality a generalized principle of intervallic relations (as conceived by Allen Forte and David Lewin) which takes the form of a modal system with serial applications.

A full description of this modal system is out of the question here, but the essentials are these: a mode is one of the 15 mirror PC set classes of 8 elements in 12 tone equal temperament; the modes are designated even or odd according to whether the axis of inversion is a chromatic pitch or a quarter tone; I have designated the even modes whose axis is not an element of the mode as “reflexive” modes. Movement I uses the eight odd modes; Movement II, the two reflexive modes; and Movement III, the remaining five even modes. With a few exceptions, the modes appear at only one pitch level (i.e. without transposition) and one at a time. The axis of inversion for the entire first movement is <E F>; in the other two movements the axis of inversion shifts as each new mode is presented.

This is all as dry as dust! But I must say that to me these modes are full of fascinating relationships with deep implications that I have done my best to elucidate. While I believe I am not temperamentally well-suited to 12-tone serial composition, I have found this modal scheme to be “rigorous but non-totalitarian” (Anatol Vieru) and very liberating. Moreover, as the modal world is vast (and by no means restricted to 12ET), I am confident that “my system” is really just a beginning, and will prove susceptible to extension and development. What makes me particularly happy is my feeling I may have found general solution to a number of nagging compositional and aesthetic issues that have vexed me for a long time, of a sort that suits me temperamentally. It’s all about intervals, and that is the way I hear music.

Normally I would conclude a program note with a brief description of the music in non-technical terms, but perhaps this piece doesn’t require it. It’s a neat package, very clear formally, with no extra-musical references. Let me just mention two things, both technical in nature. Firstly, the order of succession of modes in Movement I is governed by an interesting property of the group of odd modes: the four-note complement of any given mode is always contained in at least one other mode, and there exists a closed and delimited network of paths by which all of these modes are interrelated through complementation. I have used this network in a manner analogous to modulation in tonal music. Secondly, in Movement III, I have employed pitch-duration homomorphisms systematically for the first time in my work. There is no theme or ground bass or anything else of the sort going on, only five different schemes of correspondence between the pitches and the rhythms. This explains my choice of the designation “Variations”, which might otherwise seem puzzling.

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