

Program Notes for Piano Sonata No.8, "Il Trionfo della Folia"

"La Folia" as a term suggests folly or madness; in fact, there was an annual event in Portugal with that name in which men dressed up in bizarre clothing and danced in the streets. For me, the "folia" theme, upon which my sonata is based is best enlarged with this idea in mind. Specifically, the last section of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* summons up this state, channeled in the guise of artistic freedom, a transformed state of creative madness. Right from the outset, suggestions of the famous theme are deconstructed in frenzied animation in my piece.

And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Wave a cricle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the mild of Paradise.

The hardest thing in the world to accept is a critical death sentence. Creatively, I can think of two occasions when I felt that I was receiving one: the first occurred when I was a graduate student in a composition seminar at Columbia in 1965, and Charles Dodge had just presented a new piece of his (coincidentally called *Folia*) which was written using all the latest twelve-tone serial techniques. After the presentation, the teacher announced: "this is the way all music will be written from now on." The piece used the Babbitt "Time Point System" which integrated pitch and rhythmic developments. Considering that I was next to present and had a piano passacaglia in D minor in my bag, suddenly I was a dead duck. The second creative death knell sounded in 1985 when a visiting pianist asked me to play my new sonata (*Piano Sonata no. 1*): just as I was about to begin he proclaimed that "all the good piano music had already been written and that there was no need for any more."

Eleven piano sonatas and three piano concertos later, I often think of those two events, especially in the light of "Il Trionfo della Folia," because this piece owes everything but its structure to the past. I was working on *Piano Sonata No. 8* as a result of meeting the Bolivian pianist, Walter Ponce in 1997, and he had expressed considerable interest in the *folia* concept.. At that time I was not completely happy with the piece, but with Ponce's encouragement I got it hammered out as the kind of virtuoso vehicle that I had imagined it could be. Since the piece uses fragments at first, then complete phrases of the famous "Folia" theme and since the other materials trade on the gestures, if not real quotations from standard repertoire, I was justifiably concerned that the whole thing would come off merely as a bombastic rehash. The piece is dedicated to him, and this latest version represents the best of our collaboration.

The real key to the structure is the integration of at least six kinds of musical complexes, all of which use intervals in varying orders from the "Folia" theme. Not until those ideas are fully fleshed out does "La Folia" emerge with its concomitant harmony and familiar bass. The real "trionfo" is that this familiar stuff

becomes reborn in the integration of its variants. The piece is cast in a single movement to emphasize the continually developing and plastic nature of the musical materials and a continuous dance of artistic madness.

CD's of the first three piano sonatas are available from Music&Arts Programs of America, and an excellent performance of *Piano Sonata No. 6 "The Waste Land"* is available on New Ariel with Jeffrey Jacob as soloist (2008)

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