

Evan Ziporyn: *Qi*

Chicago-born clarinetist and composer Evan Ziporyn is perhaps best known for his involvement with New York's Bang on a Can marathon concerts, as well as his role as a founding member of the Bang on a Can All-Stars experimental music ensemble. A graduate of the Eastman School, Yale, and the University of California at Berkeley, Ziporyn is currently Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Music at MIT. He has studied Balinese gamelan extensively, and many of his works are influenced by Asian aesthetics or philosophy.

Ziporyn's most recent composition for string quartet, *Qi*, which received its world premiere by Brooklyn Rider at the Stillwater Music Festival on August 27, 2013, takes its name and its inspiration from qi, or chi, the Chinese concept of life energy. As the composer writes:

The string quartet always makes me think in elemental terms; perhaps it's the combination of the repertoire (Bartók and Beethoven, tough acts to follow), the instruments themselves, and the intense intimacy with which groups like Brooklyn Rider work together. So while many of my pieces have programmatic titles and/or narrative content, my string quartets tend to focus on forces of nature: water (Eel Bone), breath (Breathing Space), and now qi, the traditional Chinese character for life-force, a concept as ubiquitous and difficult to precisely define as analogous principles in all cultures and religions. Gaining awareness of and control over qi is a central, lifelong pursuit in many meditative and martial practices, including tai chi and qi gong. In my own experience, it seems that even in everyday life there are certain heightened states in which all of us become aware of qi flow — dreams of flying, repose with nature, and those rare moments in which intense engagement with something or someone allows us to briefly “break on through to the other side.” The three movements of *Qi* — Lucid Flight, Garden, and Transport — are inspired by these moments.

Qi was commissioned by Mike Kong and Christine Bulawa and is dedicated to the members of Brooklyn Rider

Luciano Berio: *Duetti for two violins*

It can happen that a violinist friend tells a composer one night that, other than those of Bartók, there are not enough violin duets today. And it can happen that the composer immediately sets himself to writing duets that night until dawn... and then more duets in moments of leisure, in different cities and hotels, between rehearsals, travelling, thinking of somebody, when looking for a present... This is what happened to me and I am grateful to that nocturnal violinist whose name [musicologist Leonardo Pinzauti (1926–2015)] is given to one of these *Duetti*.

This is how Luciano Berio described the genesis of the 34 *Duetti* for two violins. With the exception of the first duet – a nod to those Bartók violin duos – each of the pieces is associated

with one of his friends, inspired by “personal reasons and situations” and connected by “the fragile thread of daily occasions.”

The duets were composed over a period of five years, 1979–1983. Coincidentally, in the years 1944–1988, Leonard Bernstein was writing his own occasional piano pieces to celebrate birthdays and other occasions for his friends. He called his 31 pieces *Anniversaries*. While the idea is similar to that behind Berio’s *Duetti*, they are dramatically different in style. But they have one interesting thing in common. Pianist James Tocco remarked about the *Anniversaries* that there is “much more in them about [Bernstein] than the people to whom they are dedicated.” Berio himself said as much of his own pieces, that it is difficult to disentangle the personalities of composer and subject.

But Berio had something more in mind than a series of brief “persona pieces”:

In these duets there is also a pedagogical objective. Very often, as can be heard, one of the two parts is easier and focuses on specific technical problems, on different expressive characters and even on violin stereotypes, so that a young violinist can contribute, at times, even to a relatively complex musical situation from a very simple angle - the playing of a D major scale, for instance.

He was quite serious about this. In the published score, a note from the composer says that they are “intended for school violin teaching.” The performance instruction goes on:

If the duets are performed in front of an audience, it is preferable to involve a large number of players of different age and proficiency. All the players (at least 24) will be seated on the stage: Each pair will stand up only when it is its turn to play. There should not be any pause between each duet.

The “pedagogical objective” is nowhere more obvious than in duet number 17 where Berio seems to be sharing an inside joke with (or poking fun at) his friend Leonardo, the “nocturnal violinist” who inspired the *Duetti* project. The second violin part there is nothing more than a beginner’s exercise – a one-octave D-major scale in quarter notes slowly going up, then down. Repeated five times. That’s all. But even this, with the first violin’s weft weaving deftly around the second’s simple warp, makes it, like all these little duets, a real delight.

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