



Artistic Director, Steven Schick

SFCMP in Concert January 20, 2017

Richard Festinger *Careless Love* (2016) (18')
Michael Pisaro *ricefall* (2010) (18')
Kate Soper *Door* (2007) (11')
Gyorgy Ligeti *Chamber Concerto* (1969) (21')

Conductor's Notes

One of the perplexities of creating a concert program is the nearly impossible task of knowing the mood of a given audience on a given night. One could present a provocative concert about climate change and water shortages, as we did in our “Xeriscape” program last year, only to find that a downpour on the day of the concert utterly undercut the point.

But writing these words in early December, I believe I know how we and our listeners will be feeling on the concert night. Today, January 20, is not an ordinary day. Today is Inauguration Day, and though much of what will be inaugurated is yet unclear, that which has been made clear frightens many of us.

I will spare you a cross-examination of the politics of this moment. If you're like me—but having lived with six more weeks of CNN and Huffington Post—you've had enough of the bilious, the supercilious, and the downright mendacious to last a lifetime. So let's put politics aside in favor of considering what role music can play to light the way in dark times.

Somewhere between the ascension of science in the late Renaissance (where facts came to mean everything) and the political landscape of the early 21st century (where they seem to mean nearly nothing) we've lost track of the role of music as

the means of uncovering truth. Yet at critical times—many of which within our lifetimes—music has played just this role. Think of the importance of European modernism after World War II, in which the cool logic of serial composition was a balm to the unhinged excesses of the Third Reich. For me, early Stockhausen is not the unlistenable sound of the European avant-garde, but a wounded music of deep sadness. Or think of the founding in the mid-1960's of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and what it meant for those extraordinary African-American musicians whose voices had been suppressed in the mainstream. This “power stronger than itself,” to use the title of George Lewis’s remarkable book on the AACM, still lights the way. Pauline Oliveros’s Deep Listening Institute embraced silence and patience and helped make an increasingly chaotic and impatient world more bearable. (God, how losing Pauline at the end of November was the final punch in the guts of just an awful month!) Finally, in what for me was the greatest musical moment of the recent past, my president fought back tears and sang a mournful *Amazing Grace* to the memories of nine slain members of a Charleston church.

All of these artists show us music as the language of resistance, as the vessel of loss, of hope, of rage. This is music at its richest and most complex. And perhaps here, in the resistance born of complexity, we musicians can find a role that is more than symbolic.

As contemporary musicians, we have often apologized for the complexity of our art and tried to bend it towards greater accessibility. Of course we applaud openness. But when public discourse is only ever expressed as oppositional and intractable points of view, cut into bite-sized clips and spoon fed via never-ending news cycles, perhaps we can find higher purpose in an art that thrives on nuance. When every on-line experience is reducible to the snap judgments of “thumbs up or

down” or “swipe left or right,” how deliciously refreshing and profoundly healing is poetic and complex music. When 140 characters count as a complete thought, perhaps the occasional thorniness of a longer musical essay might reassure us that important things cannot be abbreviated.

So, tonight we do not offer a special concert in response to the elevation of Donald Trump to the presidency. Instead we’ll try to do what we always try to do: simply, our best to make fearless pieces of new and complex music.

We’ll inaugurate a new work with Richard Festinger’s *Careless Love*. In our world, a premiere is the greatest sign of optimism we can offer since it necessarily envisions future audiences and artists. In Michael Pisaro’s *ricefall*, we’ll turn away from the deafening drumbeat of xenophobia and disrespect with the liminal, probing patterns of gently falling rice. We’ll celebrate new communities and new voices in Kate Soper’s *Door*, and we’ll even revisit the balm of abstraction in György Ligeti’s masterful *Chamber Concerto*.

And then we’ll do it again, and again, and again. In one concert after another, we’ll pursue our life-long goal to sharpen the musical language of resistance and, by reaching out to new musics and new communities, to live with respect and openness in the world.

Please indulge me a personal memory of another turbulent moment. In June of 1988, I was on a concert tour of Eastern Europe, having just arrived in Poland from Moscow (where I saw Reagan and Gorbachev together on Red Square.) I found myself sitting down with the American composer Kenneth Gaburo to a post-concert midnight meal in the small Warsaw apartment of Józef Patkowski. Patkowski had been president of the Polish Composers’ Union through the darkest days of the Soviet occupation of his country and, more than any single individual, was responsible for his country’s lively

contemporary music scene, in spite of repeated attempts by the government to thwart it.

The enormous storm clouds of political upheaval that were just beginning to gather on horizons all over Eastern Europe that summer were ominously mirrored by flashes of real lightning clearly visible through Patkowski's window. I sat quietly as Józef and Kenneth talked about contemporary music in Poland and how an uncompromising Polish avant-garde gave Poles a real voice even when all other freedoms of expression had been strangled. I was stunned, and still am when I think about it, by the way music—yes, thorny and complex contemporary music—was being used in Poland to promote freedom and to argue for the common good.

There was a pause in the conversation as the storm approached and the thunder rolled. I began to wonder towards what quality of the common good I was using the music that I played. Patkowski suddenly slapped his hand on the table. The food was ready he said. Let's talk about life now, not art! Then he threw his head back and laughed as though such distinctions were absurd. And the rains came.

Steven Schick