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Features:

Traditional Musical Materials in Ernest Bloch's Works for Viola

The Process of Variation in Ligeti's Sonata for Viola Solo

Approaches to Modern European Viola Repertoire: A Conversation with John Stulz

Anne Lanzilotti and John Stulz

Introduction by Anne Lanzilotti

As an interpreter of contemporary music, I am often asked by students how to execute techniques. While that is something that intrigues me, most of my time is spent examining the philosophy behind extended techniques, how to teach those techniques, and how to stay extremely relaxed while playing highly controlled, technical repertoire. Recently, John Stulz and I have been talking about the Lucerne Festival Academy (where we met in 2008) and the way the audition repertoire reflects the values of the organization.

Stulz began working on these pieces while he was a student at the New England Conservatory studying under Garth Knox. Stulz would come in every week with a new work, developing ways of approaching European modern viola repertoire. Stulz is now a composer-performer based in Paris. In addition to his position as violist in the Ensemble Intercontemporain, he is a co-founder and co-artistic director of VIVO Music Festival in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio. His commitment to performing contemporary music is strengthened by his deep engagement with philosophies of composition. In one breath, he'll be explaining Radulescu bow techniques, and in the next he'll be talking about how Calvino's *Six Essays for the New Millennium* informed his approach to contemporary music.

Younger violists have begun to ask us about how to approach this repertoire—mainly through their own interest in auditioning for the Lucerne Festival Academy—so we began discussing these concepts more and decided to put some ideas together for students who might not know where to start. Here is the list from this year's audition:

Ligeti: Sonata for Viola Solo (1991–4)
Berio: *Sequenza VI* (1967)
Maderna: *Viola* (1971)
B.A. Zimmermann: Sonata for Solo Viola: ". . . an den Gesang eines Engels" (1955)
Scelsi: *Manto* (1957)
Pintscher: *in nomine: Übermalung for Viola solo* (1999)
Grisey: *Prologue for Solo Viola* (1976)
Sciarrino: *Tre notturni brillanti* (1975)
Fujikura: *Engraving* (2014)
Hosokawa: *Threnody: to the victims of Tohoku Earthquake 3.11* (2011)
Kurtág: *Signs, Games, and Messages for Solo Viola* (1961–2005)

Looking at this list can be daunting, but perhaps by listening to the works or hearing some of the ways to approach them, students might find "truths" in the pieces that speak to them, or broader concepts for approaching contemporary repertoire that might resonate with them. The following is adapted from our recent discussion.

Anne Lanzilotti: *You've often talked about the idea of "finding a truth of a piece of music" as a starting point to how you interpret it. Could you elaborate on that idea?*

John Stulz: The aim of any great work is to create truths. This holds for music just as it does for literature, science, politics, painting or philosophy. In music, truth is neither linguistic nor logical. It comes out in instants, in moments of true feeling. But there are truths nonetheless, undeniable concepts and emotions that are eternal, infinite, and universal openings in the world. Our goal as performers is to present great works in a way that can somehow rip our listeners out of their world, even if just for a split second, and bring them into an experience of truth as something greater than themselves. In this sense,

music for me has always been a praxis towards freedom from the banalities of our tiny everyday worlds. Each great piece of music contains some experience of truth.

I start from this kind of thinking not because I claim to know truth or how one achieves it through performance, but because I think that this music in particular demands a gesture towards truth. Each of the pieces on this list come from a radical conviction which it is our job to find, understand and somehow make our own before we can successfully create the possibility of those convictions breaking through into the world. As performers, we need to do more than simply play a piece, we need to take a stand with it, we need to become a subject of the work and its truths.

So, when we begin to work on any new piece we need to enter its world from three simultaneous levels, all circling around this idea of uncovering its truths. We need to build the piece up instrumentally, we have to examine it analytically, and we must prepare ourselves philosophically to become a subject of the work. In this sense, we are working with three forms of virtuosity: instrumental virtuosity in the model of Paganini, the virtuosity of the intellect which Luciano Berio talks about in his excellent lectures *Remembering the Future*, and the virtuosity of the self that Luigi Nono calls "musical-being."

What are some ways that you as a performer engage with the material in order to expose those "truths" to an audience?

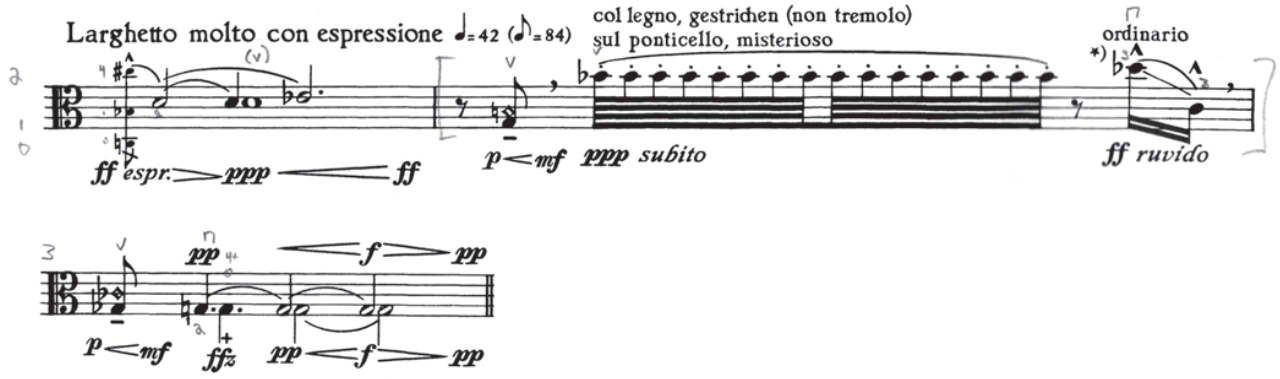
The first step is to gain control over the material itself. I start by learning to recite the piece, which means being able to execute as faithfully and easily as possible what's written on the page. This building phase relies on the same basic practicing techniques we use with any kind of music: slow practice, thinking critically about how to solve technical problems, finding ways to execute difficult passages as easily and efficiently as possible.

With music after World War II, this is of course a bit trickier because the degree of specificity for each sound increased radically as a result of both new developments in electronic music where the composer had to program each parameter of each sound individually, and the Darmstadt School's reading of Webern where each parameter is treated individually to compositional sequencing. Take, for example, the first three bars of Zimmermann's Sonata (ex. 1). Each note has its own specific dynamic, articulation, timbre, expression, and mode of playing. To play the piece properly is to have control over each and every one of these individual parameters.

You can quickly build this technique by practicing scales while focusing on controlling each parameter individually. With dynamics, for instance, start by alternating between *piano* and *forte* for each note of a scale. Have clear, equal levels so that each *forte* note is the same and each *piano* note is the same. Then, add levels, so you have ***pp–p–f–ff***, until you eventually get to the point where you can play a sequence like ***p–f–mp–fff–ppp–pp–f*** clearly enough that someone could write an accurate dictation of your dynamics.

You can take the same principle and build up a similar level of control for any parameter of sound—which in turn builds fluency and control over a much broader range of sounds on the instrument. The key to learning

Example 1. Bernd Alois Zimmerman, Sonata für Viola solo, mm. 1–3, with handwritten markings from John Stulz.

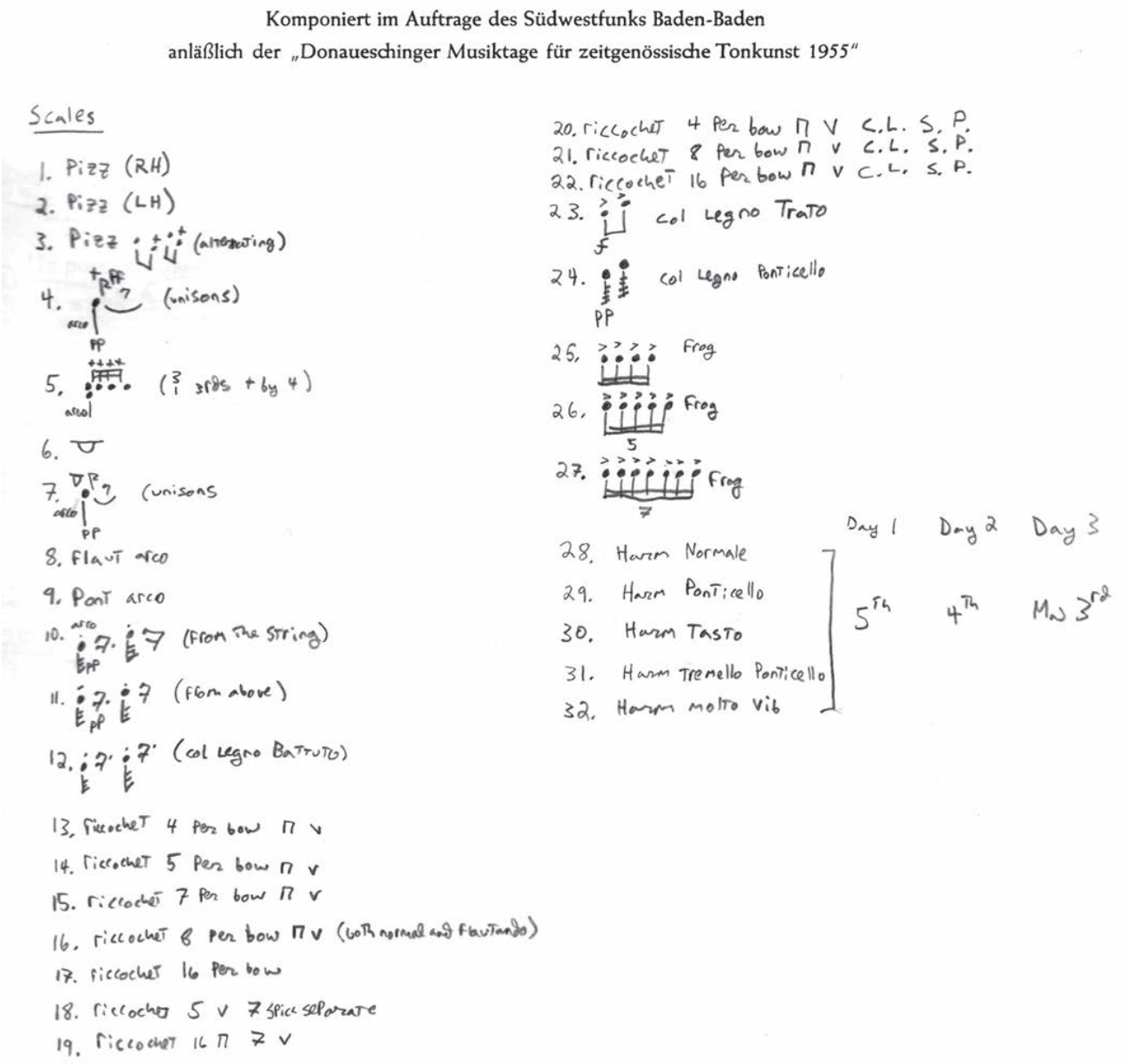


any new technique—I don't like the term extended techniques because it places an arbitrary limit that gets in the way of our openness to exploring the instrument—is to remember that the values always stay the same. Whether you're working on basic sound production or playing overpressure scratch tones, you need to perform with beauty, ease and control.

Scales are, of course, the best place to build technique. I was lucky that my teachers Roland Vamos, Donald McInnes, and Kim Kashkashian emphasized this fact. The trick, once you've developed a basic fluency with scales, is to put them to proper use so they can serve your needs. When I first started learning the Zimmerman Sonata, I followed Mr. Vamos's lead and wrote a scale regimen into my part, playing scales with each of the 32 techniques in the piece (fig. 1).

You can do this for any piece, breaking apart all of its elements so that you can focus on each technique individually. If you practice a regimen like this every day, you start to gain facility and control in no time. By

Figure 1. John Stulz's scale regimen for Zimmerman's Sonata for Viola solo.



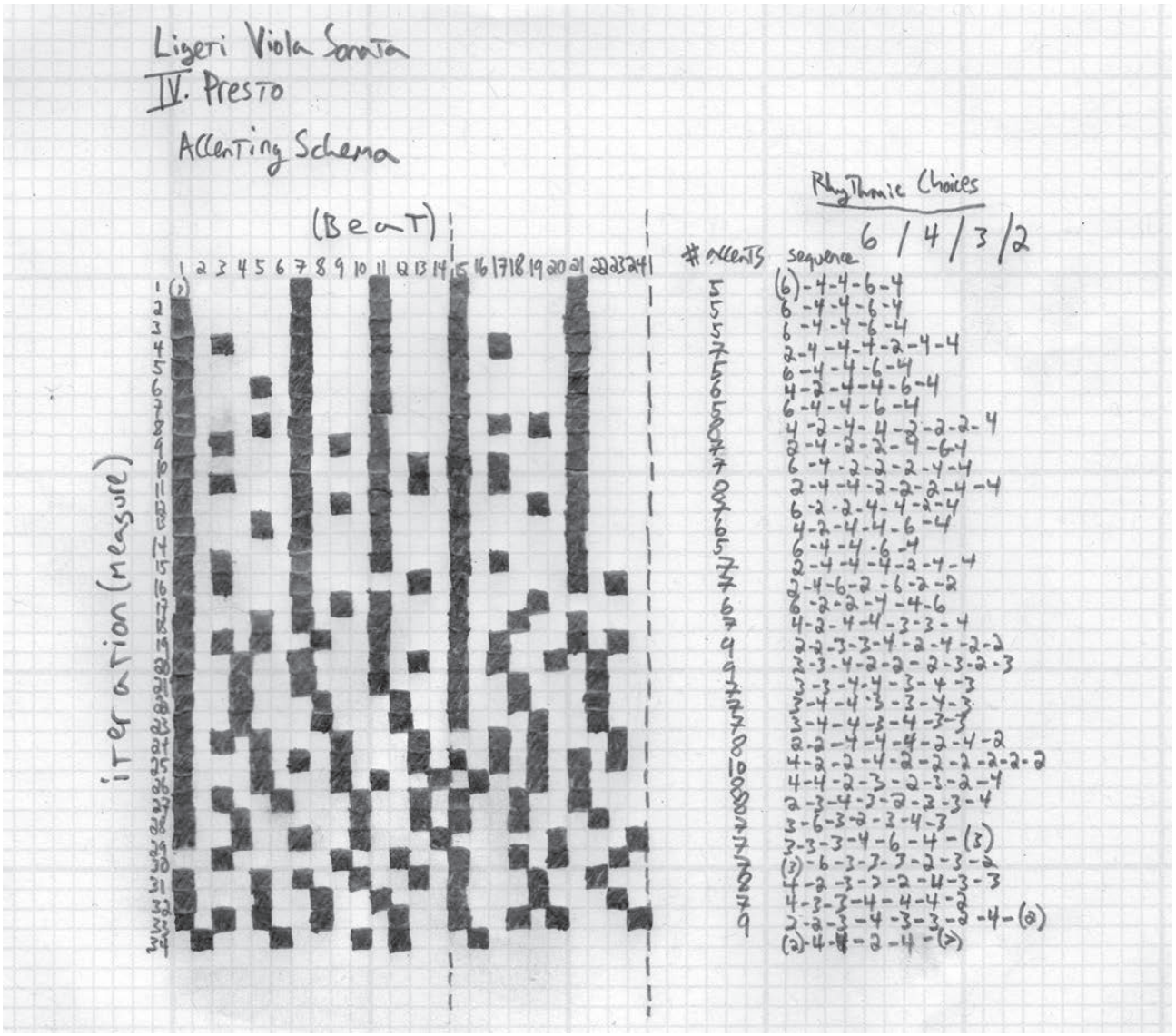
building an instrumental control of the material, you can bring the piece to life in a way that reveals the truths of the piece through the structure of the piece.

And in the Zimmermann, in order to go beyond the structure of the piece, you have to show the structure of the piece.

Exactly! That's what we could call the Boulez approach: show the logic of the piece. This is why, simultaneously with building up the piece instrumentally, we need to invest time in analysis. The end goal is to create hierarchy so that your audience can focus their listening. With Zimmerman that means showing the mirror structures, showing the variations, and playing with recurring motifs or harmonies like the opening chord. This becomes especially important in hyper-complex music by Boulez, Carter, or Ferneyhough. It's the same basic approach that you'd take to interpreting a Bach fugue. The goal is to create a "live analysis" by playing in such a way that you analyze the piece for your audience through performance. Or, put another way, play so that the audience can actually hear how you hear the piece.

So, if a performer is meticulous about the details of a piece, they can both reveal the structure or logic for themselves and the audience. In the Zimmermann, I believe timbre highlights or brings the structure into focus. These timbral details make the palindromes audible. I found that using

Figure 2. Stulz's chart of the accents from the fourth movement of Ligeti's Sonata for Viola Solo.



different highlighter colors to help me see the bow technique changes—from ponticello *to* ordinario*, as well as* col legno*—also helped me see the structure clearly. That visualization helped me not only perform these timbres accurately, but also to see the palindromes in real time as I was playing them—to see structure in time.*

That's a great technique for analysis. I like to play off clean parts in performance, so I often have secondary copies that are analyzed like this. The point is to clarify the structure in your mind.

Another useful technique is to create maps or graphs. The chart I made plotting the accents in the Presto movement of the Ligeti Sonata was incredibly helpful for me in getting beyond the instrumental difficulties of playing the piece (fig. 2). It allowed me to move between a musical logic and a visual logic, helping me to see the work for the simple chaotic breakdown that it is. At the same time, it served as a neat reminder of the kind of ideas in Ligeti's mind at the time, mirroring both the graphic cellular automata of chaos theory and the beautiful player piano rolls of Conlon Nancarrow.

Graphs or other visualizations help not just with clarifying the structure, but also with establishing a sense of the extremes of the piece.

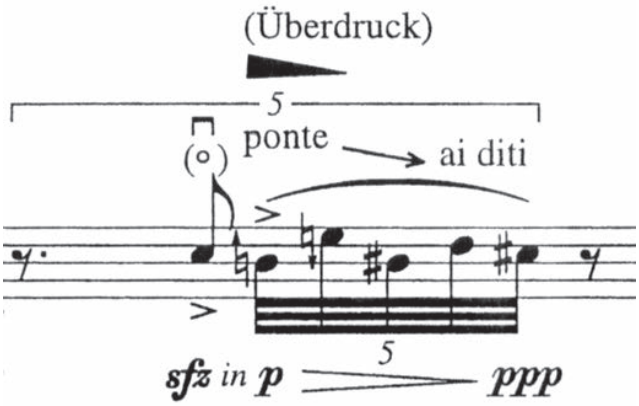
Yes. Wild extremes are a defining feature of modernism. This music forces us to think more openly about what we can do with our instrument, to go to new extremes.

One of the great moments in music history is in *Kontakte* (1958–60) where Stockhausen shows us that pitch is rhythm by glissing from a steady high pitch down through our entire range of pitch perception until the sound is revealed as a series of rhythmic pulses. It shows that sound is, at its most fundamental, simply a rhythmic disturbance moving through a medium. There are no limits beyond that. Each parameter is simply a consequence of physical force and thus, within the extreme limits of perceptibility, an infinitely-variable possibility space. With Zimmermann, we had to treat parameters platonically, as you would with orchestral excerpts. A *forte* note is always a *forte* note within the space of the piece, an F-sharp always an F-sharp. But with Grisey, Scelsi, and Pintscher we leave that world of ideal forms for the murky space of continuum.

. . . Ideal forms, and also ideal beauty, or rather traditional concepts of "beautiful." Some of these works have gorgeous, ephemeral sounds that don't work unless you let go of always trying to make a traditional, ordinary sound with lots of vibrato. Where do you think the beauty of the sound in these works comes from?

The beauty of sound comes from the material quality of the sound itself, which compels us to approach each gesture as a gestalt or unity. James Tenney's book *META+HODOS* is a great introduction to this idea. This gesture from Pintscher's *in nomine* (ex. 2) starts with a *ponticello* overpressure ("überdruck") "***sfz*** in ***p***" (!) which dissipates to ***ppp*** as the bow travels all the way towards the left-hand fingers ("ai diti"). The overall result is essentially a kind of sensual grunt, quickly shifting from scratch through tone to muffled noise. All of this is one gesture, one unity. The beauty comes from the transition between these extremes, the life within a sound. It's similar to when a teacher will tell you to play between the notes in Schubert, it's *difference* which gives meaning, which produces tension. Here we are simply playing between sound states. Kim Kashkashian's approach of sculpting notes from within is the same idea applied to classical performance.

Example 2. Matthias Pintscher, in nomine*, mm. 2*



Do you think your approach to finding "beauty" in these works is different than finding it in a Brahms sonata?

No—and Matthias would be the first to agree with me on that. The only difference is that I have a clear idea of beauty with these pieces whereas beauty has always eluded me with Brahms! But in both cases, if you play without natural freedom, musical intention, and a proper concept of beauty, you are just going to confuse people. We are lucky our teachers know the classics well enough to guide us in the right direction. With contemporary music, unless we have access to someone who has really lived with this music—like I was fortunate enough to have had in Garth Knox—we have to figure it out on our own.

Do you think that's because old concepts of beauty and old forms are more ingrained?

Absolutely. We are trained to understand the older forms, the sense of repetition, harmonic tension, and order. These forms, however, are generally much more subtle than what we find in the contemporary repertoire. Just look again at the diagram for the Ligeti Sonata—try making something like that for a Brahms quintet!

For me, form is memory: the synthesis of past events with the present to imply a future. Events can grow out of the past, be in conflict with the past, have no relation to the past, or even negate the past. Reading is an important way into understanding this. We think of literature as something removed from time, but the act of reading takes time. With every word memory is added to. Take the novels of Joyce, Beckett, Cortázar, Burroughs or Thomas Bernhard. Each of these authors radically experimented with this fact, and redefined the form of the read novel. Their thinking was in turn picked up by composers and applied to composition, as each of these authors have come up as citations by various composers in my background research. Just as with the visual representations of Ligeti above, it is important to shift between different modalities of thought, tracing ideas as they appear across disciplines.

That's something that I loved about the Iannis Xenakis book you recommended, Formalized Music. *It has changed the way I think about time and memory. I believe those concepts can be applied to all types of music, but they are perhaps hyper-realized in these new pieces. Or maybe we just give ourselves permission to find our own solutions and listen this way with new works because they don't yet carry the same weight of tradition.*

Xenakis is the perfect model of transdisciplinary thinking. In each composition, he brings together concepts from statistics, architecture, myth and philosophy, forcing us mere instrumentalists to follow him and engage with highly specialized ideas in each of those disciplines. First and foremost, he taught us to listen stochastically, to perceive complex masses like a flock of birds as one unit. Whereas at the micro level of each gesture the detail in a lot of contemporary music is staggering, at the macro level overall forms are often bold, direct, and straightforward. *Finnegans Wake* is a wild book filled with an infinite world of detail, but at the end of the day it's only the stream of unconsciousness of a sleeping (or dead) man stuck in an eternal loop. By the old standards, a Jackson Pollock painting is formless, but then you take a step back and remember that it's just primal psychic action in a rectangle. Contemporary music is often formally direct in a similar way which, in a sense, makes it easier to understand.

Perhaps then figuring it out on your own is an exciting part of the work: to think about which process the composer is using, to be able to navigate between the expanse of details and the focus that form or process brings. Which of these works do you think are most direct or bold in their use of form?

Ligeti's Sonata is based on the idea of chaotic growth, looping, and cycling. As the drawing above shows, each movement is, on the formal level, a simple gesture which is easy to show in performance. Grisey and Berio also use simple processes, but combined in a slightly more complex overall structure. Each of Sciarrino's *Tre notturni brillanti* are built on only a few repeating ideas, so it becomes a simple game of how the gestures are different each time. This makes them wonderful pieces for children. And then, of course, the most basic form of all is the so-called Moment Form we find in Maderna. It is a rejection of narrative logic; the performer's role is simply to play each gesture as is. The listener will associate or not as they see fit, but it's really an internally open piece, where each moment is what counts—which is why you can, and should, play it in any order.

The ability to make associations in any of these works takes focused listening on the part of the audience. This also means taking on the perspective of the composer: how they hear sound, how they make sense of structure in time. Perspective-taking is something I've been thinking about a lot recently. The greatest resource of this list is that it gathers various voices with different perspectives on form, organization, melody, etc. Playing these pieces means taking on these different ways of thinking.

That's because these composers knew the truth of the avant-garde! They understood that art can only be art if it is new. Each of these composers had to struggle with the entire history of western music and against each other to create a musical language that was both singular and new. The diversity of ideas is absolutely stunning—and that's from a list which doesn't even include the greatest masters of the era: Boulez, Nono, Xenakis, Feldman, Stockhausen, Carter, and Cage! Although we know now that this old concept of avant-garde only saw the world from a very limited perspective (except, maybe, in Nono's case), it's important to retain the basic understanding that meaning comes from the hard work of expanding one's world.

And it's so important to do this hard work today! For us, that means not just learning how to execute a piece only to let it go once it's "learned." We need to continue and deepen our engagement with these works by grappling with their ideas over long stretches of time. Music, like all things, is terribly unsatisfying if it exists only at the surface level so common in our current mindset.

I think that's part of what Dai Fujikura wanted to do by asking the performer to determine the order of the "elements" and therefore the form in Engraving. *By forcing the performers to choose which permutation of the piece to play, he is making them think about how these textures or systems of organization could be put together to create a piece. He asks them not just to learn the notes, or to be able to execute the piece on a "surface level," but also to take part in the process of thinking deeply about how one thing leads to another.*

That's what was so clever about Dai's piece, which admittedly I have yet to work on. It was a test piece, but rather than testing the violist's ability to play notes, he tested their understanding of form.

Yes, and the results were fascinating. Of course, my preferred order is influenced by the order he sent "elements" to me while he was working on the piece. I only experienced seeing the elements one at a time as he sent them—I would record them and send them back, offering suggestions for playability. So they began to take shape as individual pieces before they were a part of the whole. Also, having played so much of his viola music and seeing how he deals with form affects my instincts about how one element should lead to the next. However, it was wonderful to see how the participants in the Tokyo International Competition [for which the piece was written] all came up with their own solutions that felt true to their interpretations.

This gets back to the ideas of virtuosity we discussed earlier: those performances were convincing because the performers all succeeded in getting beyond the technical facets of the instrument to deal with the piece on a deeper level. You can't just thoughtlessly pick the order; you have to carry out an analysis based on the ramifications of the order you chose. Just as in the opposite case of Maderna, you can't (thoughtlessly) try to compose a logical order. Any sense of predetermined order would kill the piece.

We have talked a lot about the performer making form clear to the audience, but where do you draw the line between emphasizing perceptibility and affecting one's performing too much?

That's a hard one! I think it goes back to our model of how to play a fugue so you show the logic of the piece. If you overemphasize one voice it becomes redundant and you take away the possibility of listening on different levels. I think approaching with the goal of creating multiple levels for listening is key. We need to show and guide and analyze the work for our audience, but we still need to allow them to listen to the work on all of its various levels. Just as there is a skill of listening contrapuntally, there is a skill to listening to various contemporary musics. Ideally, we should perform in such a way that makes sense for both those listeners who have that skill and those who don't.

One trick is to find ways of using subtle visual cues to help guide your listener. For instance, being intentional about placing a mute in the dramatic place of the music (as in that weird muted aside in the last movement of Bartok's second string quartet), holding still during a fermata to physically mirror the musical stasis, or turning your ear toward the viola to listen "inside" the instrument. It's really just a matter of recognizing the theater of performance and using that to your advantage without getting in the way. Garth Knox is the master of this; when he plays he teaches you how to listen.

. . . Which is emphasized by his focus on playing naturally—these moments of gesture are all a part of a greater system of physical ease and facility, so it never seems unnatural.

Yes, everything is integrated. The greatest hurdle is finding a way to turn these abstract musical languages into something completely natural and organic to you as a performer. Virtuosity, regardless of the type, always means making something easy despite the enormous amount of work and effort put in behind the scenes.

Berio's *Sequenza* is the virtuoso piece ne plus ultra. In spite of its radical physical demands, you need to play in such a way that it is free and relaxed. That means, through smart practicing, learning how to let go, learning how to economize effort, and learning how to vary muscle usage so that you never over exert one muscle to the point of collapse.

While keeping physical ease as paramount, does the hall or space you perform in change how you approach the theater of performance?

Certainly. Music is always sound in space, which means we have to understand how to play the room. The space is not only an extension of your instrument, but an instrument in itself.

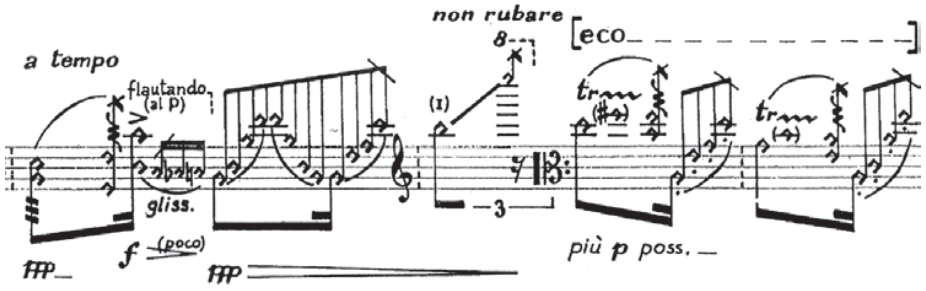
In his first notturno (ex. 3), Sciarrino toys around with the idea of audibility: play as quietly as possible and then play the echo of that (the notes marked "[eco_ _ _ _]")! This is music really at, and often under, the limit of what the public can hear. That requires us to factor in the distance between us and the listener, resonance, ambient sounds, and each individual's range of perception in order to know how the piece will be perceived. We are inverting the traditional dynamic which says that the violist needs to articulate and enunciate sounds so that they are clearly understood; here we are hiding sounds in the shadows so the public is challenged to listen.

That challenge itself is some of the drama of performance. Getting the audience to lean in can make a large space seem small, or make a small space seem infinite. Kurtág often demands both: this ability to get the audience to lean in, and the ability to project aggressive energy to the back of the hall. When you have to perform a piece that makes these sorts of demands of extremes in sound, how do you approach learning and performing it?

Kurtág might be the most demanding composer of all on this list; it is a music of impossibility coming from an existential necessity. In a way, his presence on this list is a trap! They are not just short pieces you can put together quickly to fulfill the contemporary music requirement. It takes the highest levels of instrumental, intellectual and philosophical virtuosity to achieve even a semi-decent performance. Practicing it makes me feel like I'm on a blind pilgrimage, like I'm hundreds of miles away from a place I want to be that possibly doesn't exist but each step *might* take me a little closer.

The point, to reiterate, is not that we claim to know "truth" or what makes a performance "truthful," but that we gesture towards truth. Achieving the basic standards of a piece (sound, intonation, rhythm, etc.) is only the first step. Each of these pieces is an infinite opening. They are like Bach, a lifetime of work. The exciting thing is that as younger violists are starting to learn these pieces, we are watching them become part of the canon. Now our task is to unlock their truths.

Example 3. Salvatore Sciarrino, I. Di volo, mm. 14–16 from Tre notturni brillanti.



Anne Lanzilotti is a performer, composer, scholar, and educator. In addition to her position as Assistant Professor of Viola at University of Northern Colorado School of Music, she runs the Contemporary Music Ensemble and is Co-Director of Open Space Festival of New Music. As a performer, Dr. Lanzilotti has distinguished herself by collaborating with composers of her generation. Read more about her current commissioning initiative with Anna Thorvaldsdottir, Andrew Norman, and Scott Wollschleger, The 20/19 Project at http://annelanzilotti.com

John Stulz plays viola with Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris, France and is founding co-artistic director of VIVO Music Festival in Columbus, Ohio. Prior to joining EIC in 2015, John was a fellow of Carnegie Hall's Ensemble ACJW and performed with such organizations as the Marlboro Music Festival, Klangforum Wien (Austria), Omnibus Ensemble (Uzbekistan), and What's Next? Ensemble in Los Angeles which he founded with conductor Vimbayi Kaziboni. John's teachers include Donald McInnes, Kim Kashkashian, Roland and Almita Vamos, and Garth Knox.