Lecture-Recital: “An Analysis of Elliott Carter’s Gra”

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As a performer of recent music, I have found it necessary to uncover the underlying formal/structural features as a basis for forming an interpretation of a given piece. Since no detailed analysis/performer’s guide to Elliott Carter’s 1993 work Gra (which means “game” in Polish) has appeared in print, I was eager to make discoveries which, hopefully, would serve to make others’ and my performances of this great work more engaging and exciting. Carter states in the opening of the score: “This clarinet piece, frequently changing and playful in character (yet based on the same material throughout), recalls to me my many visits with the composer (Witold Lutoslawski) in America and Poland.” In this lecture-recital, I will discuss what I conceive to be Gra’s same material – the all-triad [0,1,2,4,7,8] hexachord – which serves as the constant feature in this piece of ever-changing moods and characters. I will show how rhythmic gesture – including metric diminuendi – and modern clarinet techniques such as multiphonics and timbral variance serve structurally and motivically in the piece.

Gra’s form consists of three sections which are defined by Carter’s use of Character-Structures – or in his terms “musical characters”. These Character-Structures are motivic gestures typified by certain rhythmic, articulation, dynamic, or playing style content. In this piece, they are either espressivo or scherzando in nature. It is the growth of – and interplay between – these Character-Structures which define the three sections and give the piece “drama”. In this presentation, I will perform and discuss how these
opposing musical personae are created and explored in Carter’s all-triad hexachord “game”.

Selected Bibliography


Selected Discography

*Gra*

**Bridge BCD** (CD) (1994); *Elliott Carter: Eight Compositions (1943-1993)*; The Group for Contemporary Music: Charles Neidich (cl); with *Enchanted Preludes; Duo for Violin and Piano; Scrivo in Vento; Changes; Con Leggerezza Pensosa; Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi, Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*