

Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

Chamber Music Society; Mozart's "Davidde penitente"

ONE OF THE UNEXPECTED by-products of the season's first concert by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Alice Tully Hall was the discovery that, despite all advances in acoustical science, a composer of the eighteenth century knew better how to write for Julian Bream's lute than a composer of the current century does for Julian Bream and his guitar. In a D-major concerto for lute, strings, and continuo (no number offered), Antonio Vivaldi created a sonorous field in which the tripping, twinkling, invigorating tinkle of the lute intruded a constant pattern of delight. In Richard Rodney Bennett's recent concerto, the composer has surrounded the guitar with eleven of the densest-sounding instruments he could find (trumpet, horn, bass clarinet, oboe-English horn, flute-piccolo) plus an extensive battery (two players), and challenged the instrumentalist to pick his way through the resultant hubbub.

Why then, it might be inquired, was there no amplification? Ah, yes. There were sizable speakers on either wing of the stage, fed by a microphone situated Breamside. Through them, the guitar could be heard every so often, as Bennett granted it a cadenza or a soliloquy. The problem was, rather, with the total output when the ensemble of eleven was fully engaged. Unlike the Spanish Joaquín Rodrigo, who has a sense of proportion in writing for guitar and orchestra, the English Bennett was bent more on showing off his ingenuity than creating a homogeneous texture. Conscientious artist that he is, Bream took it all in stride. But he was better served by his long-gone benefactor than by his contemporary colleague.

It was, in all, an auspicious beginning for the Society's third season, with a full Tully Hall of auditors and sufficient status in the musical community to absorb two unexpected deletions of talent and maintain quality nevertheless. The double debit resulted from the inability of the ailing Michael Tilson Thomas to participate. But, as director Charles Wadsworth explained in an engaging apologia to the audience, there was Christopher Keene willing to learn and conduct the Bennett between Thursday and Sunday, and Richard Goode to join Wadsworth in Debussy's *En Blanc et Noir*, vice Thomas as first pianist. The per-

formances thus improvised might not have had ultimate subtlety, but each had a degree of spontaneity that added zest to the outcome. Debussy's seldom performed two-piano duet of World War I days is not of his first quality, but its several sections—the first dedicated to Serge Koussevitzky, the last to Igor Stravinsky—show his mind reaching out in new directions, even against debilities of mood and health. The program ended with the Spohr *Nonetto* (Opus 31).

The high season of pianism began, for some, with the reappearance of Alicia de Larrocha in the Assembly Hall of Hunter College. The "some" would certainly have included those of her constituency who ignored a heavy downpour to buy out most of the seats remaining in the 2,200-capacity auditorium. The lure, moreover, was not esoterica of the Spanish literature, but such familiar matter as Bach's Concerto in the Italian style, a Mendelssohn group, and Schumann's *Carnaval*. Miss de Larrocha was in rare mood and excelling pianistic form, applying her refinement, insight, and artistry to works where she found no problems, only opportunities. The scale was not heroic, but where power was required, as in the climax of Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*, she had, in abundance, the necessary reserve.

As every Savoyard knows, Ko-Ko in *The Mikado* had "a little list." Before too long, the New York Philharmonic's patrons may be compiling their own category of things that "never would be missed," beginning with the more than a little Liszt they are being served this year. Most recently, it was the "Dante" Symphony for which Michael Gielen was intermediary between the performers (soprano Margaret Price, the Schola Cantorum, as well as the orchestra) and the audience, not to mention Hell and Purgatory.

In common with almost every major work of Liszt—and the "Dante" Symphony is one of the most major—this score is a compound of the flaming and the flamboyant, of brilliance and tinsel, of eloquence and bombast. More than anything else it is interminably hortatory, presenting one grandiose statement after another, but rarely offering the listener a connective tissue of substantive matter. Liszt was, of

course, one of the most fluent musicians in history, whether composing or performing, and he amassed an infinite ability to raise Hell with the orchestra (suitably enough, in the Inferno). But it might be well to remember that, in the beginning, there was Berlioz, not nearly so versatile a musician or so successful a self-promoter as Liszt. He pointed almost every way, orchestrally, that both Liszt and Wagner followed, and was writing orchestral works in response to Goethe, Shakespeare, and Byron before Liszt discovered there was more to music than the piano.

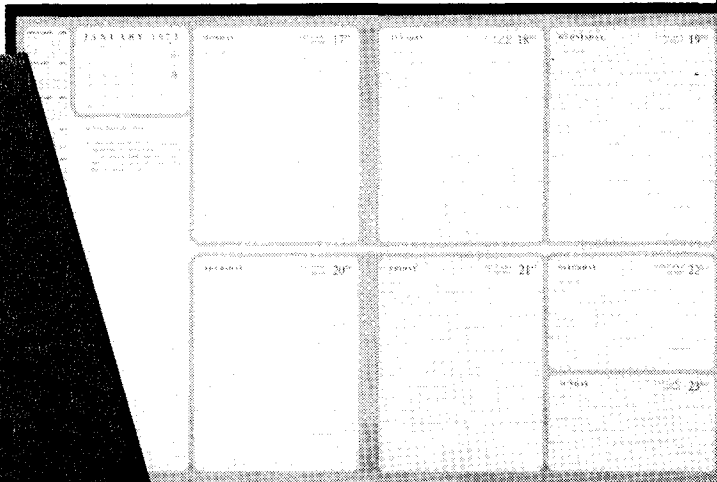
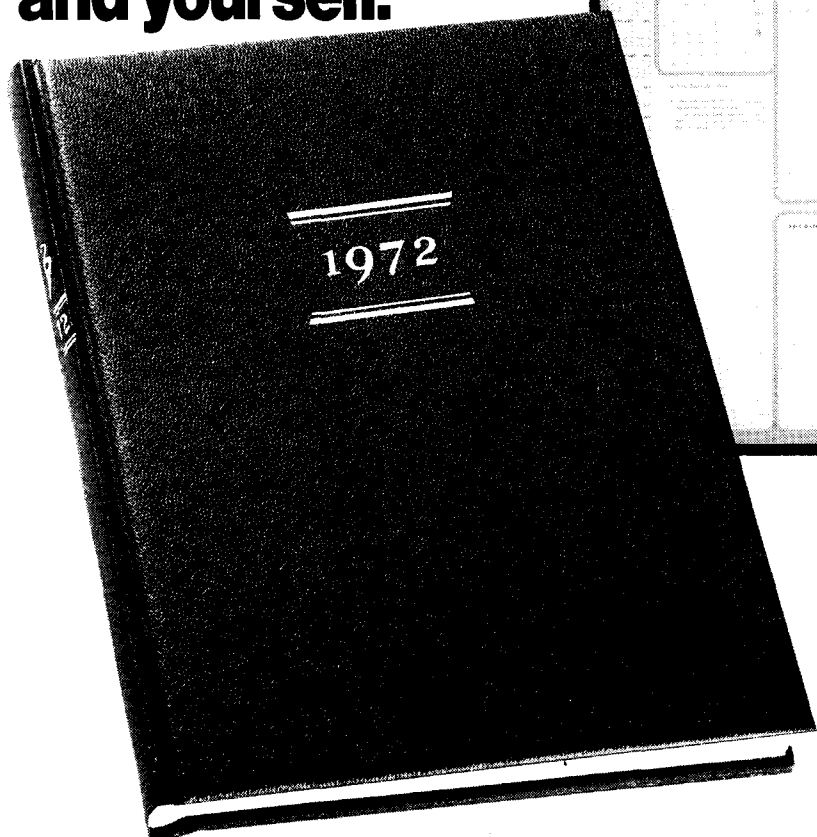
It should be said for Gielen, however, and his aptly chosen associates, that the case for Dante was argued with vigor and conviction. The conductor clearly enjoys the attention of the players (no foregone conclusion where the Philharmonic and a guest conductor are concerned), and they responded with precision, finesse, and fine coloristic flavor. Similarly, the English Miss Price and the women's voices of the chorus gave their parts a gloss of sound that complemented the high spots of Liszt's conception.

Thankfully, Gielen had the musical insight and artistic taste to balance the "Dante" Symphony with Mozart's infrequently performed, rarely recorded *Davidde penitente*. Nevertheless, more than a little of it is familiar, for, in large part, it is an adaptation, for concert purposes, of the great C-minor Mass Mozart wrote to consummate, artistically, his marriage to Constanze Weber (1782-3). The adaptation deprives those acquainted with the Mass of its musical crown, "Et incarnatus est," but atones with two new sections relating to the Psalms of David. The first is a tenor solo of considerable beauty, to which George Shirley gave artistic expression despite shortness of vocal range; the second a treacherously complicated soprano aria, "Fra l'oscure ombre funeste," for which Miss Price's strong, clear sound was admirably appropriate. When she was joined by Sheila Armstrong in a duet derived from "Domine Deus, Rex coelestis" of the Mass, the technical security (including trills) and musicality of the two sopranos were decidedly complementary to the background of English training they share.

Considering the matter in his three Philharmonic programs to date (Mozart, Schoenberg, Liszt, Berg, Nono, and Strauss), Gielen may be described as a musician capable of bridging a wide span of the musical mainstream, plus some side channels and eddies. As the nature of music, like any other physical phenomenon, abhors a vacuum, Gielen may be destined to fill a place long occupied by the late Hans Rosbaud.



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SR Goes to the Movies

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Crime in the Cities

ALTHOUGH our cities are rapidly becoming impossible to live in, they are, as our movies keep reminding us, great places for dying. The sheer impersonality of their clatter and bustle, the dwarfing effect of their skyscrapers, the sense of entrapment created by their traffic-logged streets—or worse, one's chilling awareness of his own vulnerability once those streets have emptied in the dark hours before dawn—produce a latent feeling of menace that can flare into panic with the slightest touch of the imagination. Two new pictures, *The Organization* and *The French Connection*, skillfully augment the melodramatics of modern crime detection with these terrors inherent in our metropolises, and both wind up as superior thrillers.

It is perhaps significant that in both films—one based loosely on fact, the other wholly fictional—the criminals are international narcotics dealers, with wealth and resources far beyond those of the local enforcement agencies. Indeed, there is the implication that their influence extends into the upper echelons of police officialdom, leaving the hapless line detectives uncertain whether their real enemies are behind or in front of them. Clearly, theirs is a dedication above and beyond the call of duty—pathological in the case of Gene Hackman in *The French Connection*, totally committed

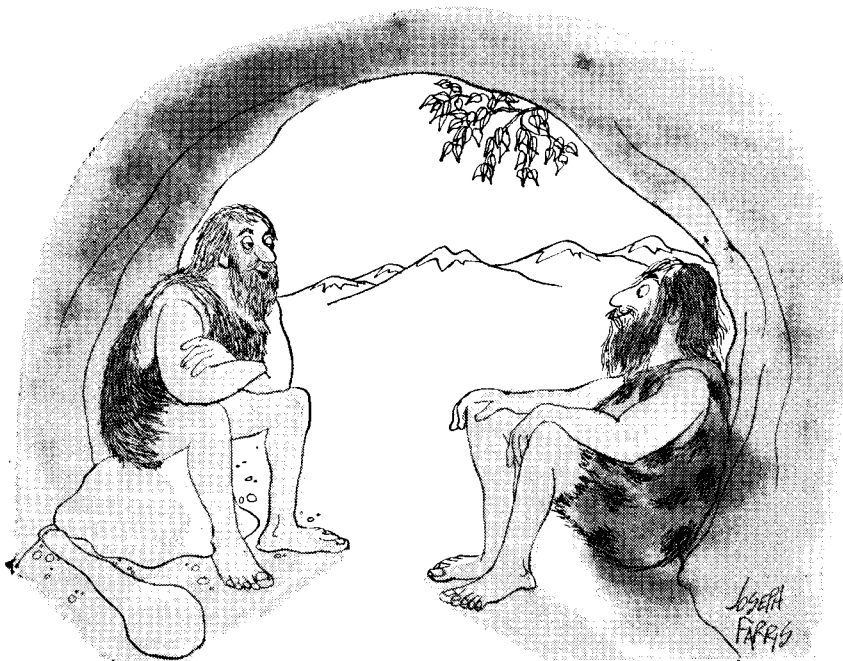
in that of Sidney Poitier, continuing in *The Organization* his Mr. Tibbs role. The fact that both detectives succeed in hitting their immediate targets while the top men escape scot-free may be interpreted as either the new realism or the new cynicism. Neither interpretation is apt to make the average city-dweller feel terribly secure.

In *The French Connection*, freely adapted from Robin Moore's best seller, the city is New York, and not since *Bullitt* has a city been so effectively mobilized to enhance a fundamentally routine cops and robbers script. The parallel is most evident in the spine-tingling chase of a hijacked elevated train by a police car snaking through the traffic below. (One wonders if the innocent bystanders whose cars are sideswiped in such a chase ever receive compensation from the P.D.) But no less to the point are the shady bars and shadowy alleys that present an open invitation to mayhem, or crowded Fifth Avenue and the even more crowded subways where a man under police surveillance can readily elude his pursuers. If *The French Connection* features New York at its most impersonal worst, it also offers Gene Hackman at his thespian best. As the overwrought, overworked, overzealous narco squad detective, he packs a drive and intensity that make one at once grateful and troubled that he is on our side of the law.

No such doubts assail us as we watch

Sidney Poitier pursue the pushers in *The Organization*. James R. Webb's original screenplay, a combination of Mr. Tibbs and *Mod Squad*, ingeniously aligns Poitier with a sextet of former users and dealers who have their own reasons for fighting the drug syndicate. As in earlier Tibbs episodes, this connection places him outside the law, even to the extent of turning in his badge; but his instincts, it transpires, are sound, leading him to ever-higher echelons of organized crime. There is a nice sense about this film—due in part to the writing, and in no small part to the casting—of never quite knowing in whom to believe: the sweating vice president of a furniture factory whose boss has been murdered; the cool, drunken wife of the murdered man; the Negro head of the local narco bureau. What you do believe, always, is that San Francisco is every bit as hospitable to would-be criminals as New York. The inevitable auto chases never approach the tension of the one in *Bullitt*, but this deficiency is more than compensated for by a three-way manhunt through the diggings for the still uncompleted Bay Area Rapid Transit in downtown Frisco. And the dead-of-night details of the multi-million-dollar drug theft that introduces the film are as suspenseful as any movie heist since *Rififi*.

There is, however, another kind of crime that can be chalked up to the cities, and this is developed by exquisite, poignant, and often terribly funny flashbacks in a movie called, unfortunately, *T. R. Baskin*. T. R. Baskin is a girl from Ohio who takes up residence in Chicago to partake of the sophisticated pleasures of an urban center. Those pleasures, it soon develops, consist of high rents for inadequate apartments, a particularly unrewarding nine-to-five job with a depressingly computerized firm, and a round of dreary seductions that climaxes in a hotel room encounter with an auto tire salesman from Utica, New York. The coldness of the big cities is perhaps best summed up by the salesman (Peter Boyle) who, after an unsuccessful attempt to make love to T. R., plaintively observes, "Utica doesn't frighten people." Chicago does, and Candice Bergen, topping her performance in *Carnal Knowledge*, touchingly depicts the vulnerability of a would-be sophisticate fresh from the sticks. The script, by Peter Hyams, while consistently witty and fresh, suffers from dialogue that—in his own phrase—"talks like a typewriter," but director Herbert Ross has done a masterful job of making his people act like humans. Unlike the melodramatists, Hyams and Ross seem to feel that humanity and decency can, at least for a while, hold the city at bay.



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