

Music Review: Matthew Aucoin's Newest Composition is an Intriguing Exercise in Active Listening

Last Thursday morning, in a small concert at Harvard University's Sanders Theater, recent alumnus and critically acclaimed composer Matthew Aucoin premiered his latest work, a modernistic duo for piano and violin that bears the seemingly mysterious title "Its Own Accord." With Aucoin at the piano and fellow Harvard graduate Keir GoGwilt on the violin, the performance was certainly not lacking in technical excellence. Indeed, I can offer nothing but praise to the musicians, who only had two rehearsals to prepare, for keeping so well together in a piece that is littered with shifts in tempo and meter. However, the composition failed to impress a number of listeners, perhaps because it offered little in the way of conventional musical "satisfaction": on first hearing, the repetitive rhythms and unsystematic harmonies can be puzzling and even exasperating. Although these gripes speak to possible inadequacies in Aucoin's work, they stem from what I contend to be a superficial understanding of the music, one that arises from passive listening. Instead, by choosing to actively engage her analytical faculties with the music, the astute listener discovers that Aucoin is cleverly utilizing variations in dynamics, tempo, and meter, as well as corresponding fluctuations in harmony and register, to musically delineate the natural processes of growth and decay that are fundamental to life as we know it.

After the concert, an elderly lady next to whom I was seated asked me with a smirk on her face, "Is the composer a student in First Nights?", as if to suggest that the piece must have been written by an introductory music student. I could not help but object to her dismissive attitude toward the composer, but to be fair, Aucoin's behavior did little to bolster his case. For instance, during a special question-and-answer session that occurred in Sanders Theater on the previous Tuesday, Aucoin deflected many of the queries put to him, and instead of clarifying what he hoped for people to gain from listening to his perplexing composition, he brusquely declared, "Trust your ears!" To make matters worse, throughout the performance, Aucoin kept gyrating his arms in a histrionic fashion, as though he were playing a Rachmaninoff piano concerto rather than a rhythmically monotonous and largely non-melodic line. The composer's excessively animated approach to what he himself called a "chilled-out" piece failed to match up with the violinist's laid-back attitude. Although GoGwilt often had the more expressive and melodic lines, he seemed less involved with the piece emotionally, preferring to concentrate on playing his technically difficult part as perfectly as possible. Remarkably, the disparity between Aucoin's passion and GoGwilt's relative indifference was reflected in the views of the audience. Some listeners, like the lady sitting beside me, could not fathom what, if anything, made the piece worth caring about; as a fellow student asserted in an interview last Friday, "the music was so absolutely boring that I will probably never listen to it again." On the other hand, I overheard an enthusiastic middle-aged woman, who had attended the dress rehearsal preceding the concert, mention to her friend that she feels "more involved with the piece having heard it twice" and is "eager to hear it again," implying that she had identified some aspect of the music that in her mind warranted further consideration. Although I do not approve of Aucoin's overzealous display, I must side with this latter perspective, for as is argued in what follows, there is much to be learned from actively analyzing and interpreting the piece, rather than blindly dismissing it as sonically unpleasant.

For what is almost the entire duration of the piece, the piano plays a rhythmic motive consisting of two chords, the first held short and the second long. This steady flow of musical iambs, repetitive and tiresome though it may seem, functions as the rhythmic foundation for the composition. Indeed, as Aucoin described in the question-and-answer session, the piano serves as the “pulse-keeper” for the piece, an apt analogy considering how closely the iamb resembles a heartbeat. But just like how our own heart rates fluctuate in accordance with our feelings and the passage of time, the tempo and meter to which Aucoin sets his iambs depends on the dynamic level of the music. In each phrase of what one might call the first “section” of the piece, the dynamic level of the music undergoes a *crescendo*, or increase in volume, and congruently, the iambic motive undergoes an *accelerando*, or increase in tempo. A similar crescendo-cum-accelerando occurs in the following section; this time, the increase in tempo serves to emphasize the piano and its pounding heartbeat over the violin, which is consigned to playing straight octaves. This close correspondence between the dynamic intensity of the music and the tempo underlying the iambic motive is maintained in subsequent sections of the piece. For example, in the third section, phrases of growing dynamic intensity begin to alternate with passages of diminishing vigor, and the speed of the iambic rhythms in the piano varies accordingly. When the dynamic level diminishes in the concluding section of the piece, so does the tempo, as well as the meter: almost imperceptibly, the meter changes from being in three to being in four, so that the long note of each iamb increases in length from a half-note to a dotted half-note. This “intensity correspondence” between dynamics, tempo, and meter suggests the following natural interpretation: if each musical iamb represents a heartbeat, the phrases of growing intensity symbolize bursts of youthful energy, but as time passes and youth gives way to old age, the heartbeats begin to slow down of *their own accord*, eventually decaying into the silence of death.

The natural theme of decay is further accentuated by Aucoin’s novel idea of allowing conventional, pleasing sounds to degenerate into unfamiliar, scary ones. In the words of one of my classmates, each section of the piece can be divided into “sequential microphrases.” With few exceptions, each of these short passages consists of the iambic rhythmic motive in the piano supporting a scale-like sequence in the violin. These microphrases tend to begin at a moderate dynamic level and in a comparatively consonant harmony, which in some cases is a single note, in others an octave, and in others still a major seventh-chord. However, as each of these microphrases progresses, the registers in which both the violin and the piano play often become more extreme, and the harmonies tend to grow increasingly dissonant. At the end of one such microphrase, the violin has a frenetic atonal passage so high up on the E-string that GoGwilt was compelled to play *sul ponticello*, keeping his bow near the bridge and thereby producing a harsh nasal sound that contributed to a sense of fear and hysteria. Perhaps the most poignant microphrase in the piece begins when the violin plays straight octave E’s in a low register, allowing the pounding iambic motive in the piano to take center stage. As the microphrase unfolds, the violin’s octaves devolve into frenzied double-stops, and the chords comprising each iamb become jarringly dissonant. Furthermore, the separation between the registers of the piano’s left and right hands increases so dramatically that Aucoin’s arms spanned the entire length of the keyboard, producing a ghoulish sound resembling that of a skeleton rattling. Insofar as the piece serves to musically depict the natural law that life decays of *its own accord* over time, it is likely no accident that Aucoin allows the warm-sounding heartbeat motive to degenerate into sounds that are typically associated with death. Moreover, one might expect the music that occurs after the skeletal iambs finish to be evocative of ghosts, the universal symbols of life after death. Aucoin indeed achieves a ghost-like sound in the concluding section of the piece by reducing the overall dynamic level and

replacing the feverish double-stops and trills in the violin part, characterized by heavy bow pressure, with entire microphrases consisting purely of harmonics, which sound considerably lighter and more air-like than fully-stopped notes. This analysis of the variations in harmony and register that occur throughout the piece corroborates the claim that Aucoin is attempting to illustrate the natural process of decay through his music.

All in all, the manner in which we react to a new composition depends as much on the quality of the performance and the ability of the music to captivate our attentions as it does on how actively we choose to engage with the music. Even a rudimentary analysis of Aucoin's "Its Own Accord" demonstrates that the seemingly repetitive rhythms and aimless harmonies that pervade the piece actually admit a reasonable interpretation as being symbolic of the natural processes of growth and decay. If this piece is to stand the test of time and enjoy the success that it deserves, then future listeners must make active attempts to make sense of the music, so that they too have the chance to discover the intricacies that some of us were fortunate enough to have a glimpse of during the first performance.

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