

About the Music

J.S. Bach: *Prelude and Fugue in B Major, BWV 892*

<https://www.bachvereniging.nl/en/bwv/bwv-892>

George Harrison (arr. Peter Bence): *Here Comes the Sun*

<https://nowordsnosong.medium.com/here-comes-the-sun-the-beatles-75bb474a25c7>

Allen McCullough: *Piano Sonata No.3 – “Passacaglia Variations”*

Composed in 2018, Allen McCullough’s *Piano Sonata No.3: “Passacaglia Variations”* is the second in a cycle of four piano sonatas – a tetraptych. If played as a complete cycle, each of the individual sonatas (numbered 2-5) sounds as an individual movement within a multi-movement large scale structure, the total duration of which would be close to one hour. However, each piece was and will be (the cycle is currently in-progress) crafted such that individual sonatas can be performed separately from the monumental tetraptych; one needn’t know the 2nd Sonata to understand the 3rd Sonata, nor the 3rd Sonata to understand the 4th Sonata, and so on.

Fundamental to the premise of the 3rd Sonata is the *development* of theme – a premise somewhat at odds with the musical form of the passacaglia, which entails a *repeated* figure (an ostinato), typically in the bass voice. (In musical terms, “development” mandates variation, while “repetition” quite obviously mandates stagnation.) Thus, the work’s subtitle “*Passacaglia Variations*” navigates the calculated development of the passacaglia theme itself, which is announced at the very onset of the piece, over the span of fifteen variations.

The variation scheme aside, the sonata’s form can be conceived in several different ways. From the most distant vantage point, the opening section of the work (A) focuses on the rumbling bass register of the piano; middle section (B) – which begins with a fugue – explores the piano’s supple middle register; the sonata’s final section (C) features an intensely rhythmic and frantically irregular traversal of the piano’s highest register.

A closer look at the form reveals more mellifluous and purely melodic sections of music (labeled as a “lyrical interludes” in the score) as contrasts to the harsher and more discordant variations on the passacaglia theme. The lyrical interludes are still based, however, on the passacaglia theme itself (which opens with an octave leap), with each interlude being preceded by a brief transitional section borrowed from the 2nd Piano Sonata – the first piece in the tetraptych cycle.

Perhaps the emotional narrative of the sonata offers yet another view of the formal architecture: with the composer’s proclivities favoring overt climax directionality, the work’s extravagant apogee is clearly reached near the end of the (B) section – a culmination of energy that showcases the fullness of fully-voiced chords that only the piano can produce. While the final section, seemingly fueled with pure adrenaline, can hardly be called an anticlimax following the

orgiastic finale of the (B) section, this final portion of music does offer an escape from the grandiose and Romantic gestures of the climax, with a return to the insistent convolution of the passacaglia theme.

From any view or any angle, the work ends uncertainly – perhaps with the question: *what could possibly happen next?* Hopefully, the listener will share an equal intrigue with the composer in taking the next steps toward the 3rd installment in the tetraptych: Piano Sonata No.4! With some “grace” in mind, and for the sake of even the most committed listener, the composer plans a (mostly) calm, contemplative, and introspective piece to follow.

Johannes Brahms: *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*

<https://thelistenersclub.com/2021/12/08/brahms-handel-variations-op-24-a-monument-built-on-baroque-foundations/>