

On January 16<sup>th</sup>, panelists and performers came together in Kresge Auditorium to explore music from the perspective of memory. The forum featured panelists Peter Child, Deborah Stein, and Bruce Brubaker, all bringing their views of music and memory from their respective fields, composition, music theory, and piano performance. Unless one is a very specialized neuroscientist, an abstract topic such as memory is expected to be the grounds for some disagreement. Prof. Stein and Prof. Brubaker, in particular disagreed with each other's interpretations of music and memory

Prof. Stein started the forum with a rather technical exploration of how music and memory interact, using Romantic era ideas and 19<sup>th</sup> century Schubert and Schumann lieder as a jumping-off point. She defined memory in three ways: the process of remembering, a journey to the past, and events triggering a remembrance. She combined these definitions into an overarching idea that memory is a "cessation of time", allowing the past to temporarily become the present. In music, she explained two types of ways memory can be interwoven, through "linear" or "non-linear" means.

"Linear music" is one that has some sense of a goal, a "temporal journey", as Stein worded. She gave the audience listening examples of some Schumann piano pieces, that felt as if the melodic lines and harmonies existed to transport the listener from one place to another, very clearly transitioning to new ideas, "making progress", as she said. "Non-linear music", is much more circular, as Stein puts, "ripples in a temporal pond". A Schubert lieder based on text by Goethe illustrated this concept, where very subtle key changes allows the listener to slip into a different memory for a short period of time before returning back to the home key.

Through Prof. Stein's engaging discussion, it was clear that Prof. Brubaker did not tend to agree, often grimacing at particular remarks and occasionally writing questions to

remember for later on his notepad. When it came time to speak, however, Prof. Brubaker presented a very different take on music and memory, one that was not necessarily grounded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but rather using many aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century music.

Brubaker began by twisting the words of John Cage, who once said that “sounds are sounds”. Cage, Brubaker said, could have just as well said “time is time”. Brubaker made connections to many other mediums, such as art, literature, film, and religion, citing memory as a pivotal part of each, and that music is no different. His take on memory is that it is simply a method of “pattern recognition”, a way to explain our own experiences through what we have heard or seen in the past.

In particular, Brubaker focused on a particular genre of 20<sup>th</sup> century music known as minimalism or “process music”, showing a much greater change in musical timekeeping with this genre compared to the monolithic eras of the past. The example he played for the audience, “9-beat stretch”, illustrated the small changes and minute incongruences in Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony when slowed down to what seemed like an impossibly slow pace. Brubaker stressed that this temporal degradation is key to gaining our “soul’s attention”, giving us a better sense of the past, present, and future.

While some audience members saw this panel as a debate between two fairly distinct sides of an argument over what memory means to music, whether Stein or Brubaker were necessarily right or wrong isn’t the matter to debate. Both panelists presented their view with sufficient background and evidence to support their case, and it seems that in reality it is simply two different sides of a many-faceted subject. Stein is solidly planted in the past, and many of the Romantic ideals, such as a poetic focus and a sense of “incompletion”, clearly showed through in her talk. Brubaker, while not necessarily disagreeing openly with Stein, opted instead to focus on his area of expertise, with more

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modern music, where genres such as minimalism and process music have given new meanings and interpretation to memory in music.

Following the forum, the Boston Chamber Music Society took the stage to attempt to give listeners the opportunity to apply the panelists' talks to music stretching from the late Classical to the present day: Beethoven's *String Trio in E-flat major* (Opus 3), Peter Child's *Skyscraper Symphony*, and Dvořák's *String Quintet in E-flat major* (Opus 97). The Beethoven was essentially as I expected a late-Classical Beethoven to be, but the Child and the Dvořák spoke to me in particular in relation to the idea of memory explored during the day's events.

Peter Child's piece was written for a 1929 film of the same name, by Robert Florey. The film itself was very experimental for its time, and as such the piece is also a rather experimental one musically. Child utilizes the quartet to amplify the major aspects of the film: skyscrapers, and their interactions and juxtapositions with shadow and ground. The coloration of the piece in particular moves smoothly from open and "airy" harmonies as the film pans up a tall building, but becomes discernably darker and denser when the film nears the ground, where shadows from other buildings begin to invade the picture.

Dvořák as a turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century composer, tends to be rooted more firmly in the Classical era than other composers of his time. His "American" quintet, however, makes extensive use of a pentatonic motif, and plays upon listeners' memories by intertwining these motifs in overarching sonata and variation forms. These two forms in particular allow the listener to hear a motive or a theme first, and then reflect on it when it returns, either in the recapitulation of a sonata form movement, or a variation of a theme. In either case, each time the performers arrived back at a particular theme or motive, as a listener my experience with subsequent motives were colored by past passages in the music, and gave the piece a very rich, carefully constructed sound.

All three pieces were able to effectively convey the ideas of music in relation to time and memory. In particular, Child's and Dvořák's pieces were very appropriate choices for a

concert that explored such themes. The prevalence of the sonata form and theme and variation movements in the Dvořák helped to illustrate some of Professor Stein's comments in the forum, while the relatively experimental nature of Child's piece provided evidence for Brubaker's assertions that "time is time", by allowing yourself to become immersed in the intertwining of the movement of the film and the movement of the music.

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