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Albany] ****

Small musical world that it is, I just “witnessed” cellist Laurence Lesser (b. 1940) in concert, performing in an ensemble at Music@Menlo, in Dvorak’s Op. 97 String Quintet. I noted his suave cello tone, attributable to a 1622 Amati, and we hear it to full advantage in Beethoven’s works for cello and piano (rec. 5-9 January 2009) with Korean virtuoso Haesun Paik. Beethoven’s variations on “Hail the Conquering Hero” (c. 1797) by Handel makes a fine display piece as an opener, a fluently direct application of major and minor modalities for both instruments and eminently vocal in character. The keyboard—a bright Hamburg Steinway—flourishes prove as expansive as those for the cello, with moments of counterpoint and plenty of brilliant fioritura.

“A girl or a little wife” from Mozart’s The Magic Flute (1798) testifies to Beethoven’s open admiration for Mozart, and the Papageno aria from Act II begins as a piano solo. Not until Variation 3 does the cello assume more prominence, the piano acting in response to the cello’s declamations. Even so, the piano explodes in a march and a scherzo, until the extended, dire adagio that plumbs some emotional depths. The sweet theme reappears for bravura treatment in the heartly coda. The treatment (1801) of the duet from Mozart’s Zauberflote Act I, “In men who feel love,” casts the upbeat tune into E-flat Minor and C Minor shadows, alternating its initial cheer with poignant gravity. The keyboard writing occasionally calls to mind Mozart’s own Duport Variations K. 573, ironically conceived after a cello sonata by that otherwise unknown composer. Lesser ignites the last page with irressible schwung, and the coda sails into happy spaces in the heart.

Beethoven literally re-invented the cello sonata, expanding the medium that Boccherini and Vivaldi had first evolved, designating equal parts to the tenor and bass, often dividing the hands of the keyboard to effect a three-voice colloquy. The F Major Sonata (1796), after a fluent Adagio sostenuto, delivers a plethora of tunes in sturdy A Major and then in D Minor. The ebullient conversation between Lesser and Paik palpably bubbles with canny energy. Both instruments share a chromatic “cadenza” of sorts, only to revert to the opening materials prior to a coda marked by unbridled éclat. Beethoven proceeds to the Haydnesque Rondo by way of the cello, a rustic affair in which Lesser takes hearty delight, singing n propulsive terms and then engaging in bagpipe effects in an open fifth, a reminder of how much Beethoven welcomed “Scottish” influences. Lesser digs into the cantabile power of the cello for the expressively plaintive opening of the G Minor Sonata, which after a pregnant pause develops a bittersweet dialogue of cello versus striking piano triplets, soon modulating to C Minor. Despite a tragic cast, the music emanating from Paik’s volatile fingers retains its emotional
resiliency. If the *sturm und drang* movement could ever elicit a smile, this muscular and whimsical music makes a case in point. Paik announces the *Rondo in G Major* as a solo, the cello skittering in accompaniment; after a D Minor transition the cello finally states the melody in full. The dialogues increase in both playfulness and intensity, three cello riffs clearly imitative of Haydn. The clean, sober colors of the principals keep Beethoven's humorous virtuosity at a scintillating pitch, a brilliant tonic to the occasional hint of darkness that invests this arresting work.

The *A Major Sonata* (1808) provides the most gratifying vehicle for Lesser's opulent tone, beautifully balanced against Paik's elaborately glittering piano part. Even in the midst of the first movement's stormy development, a basic serenity of purpose permeates the proceedings, which can be contrapuntally quite muscular. On the tender side, Beethoven (unconsciously) quotes a plaintive moment from Bach's *St. John Passion*. A velvet fire emanates from the latter part of the development and into the recapitulation, especially as its ornamental aspects prove as organic to the evolution of the material as any of the main themes. The *A Minor Scherzo* opens with pungent chords from Paik, the angular material then presented by Lesser, and the pair sojourns in two variants before moving to the trio in the tonic major. Suave double stops from Lesser accompany both quick and non-legato chords from Paik keep us agitated even in the midst of structural symmetries. Lesser and Paik turn the *E Major Adagio cantabile* into a lovely nocturne--too short lived--for the spirited *Allegro vivace* supplants the melancholic humor with protean figures in kaleidoscopic moods and brilliant, comic effects, a tour de force for a serendipitous partnership.

The two sonatas, *Op. 102* of 1815 embody Beethoven's late, compressed style--four movements arranged into two pairs (in the Op. 102, No. 1)--a concoction of Baroque trio sonata and Romantic fantasia. The angular quality of the *C Major*, with its sudden pummeling sforzati and metric shifts, its hard cadences and harp effects, may have served as a model for the later sonata by Debussy. The explosive writing, especially in the keyboard, its penchant for decoration and meditation, seems close to the *Op. 111 Piano Sonata*. The *C Major's* last section gravitates to aggressive counterpoint for the cello and piano, the cello's adding a grumpy E-flat moment of bagpipe and long pedal cadences. The three-movement *D Major Sonata* opens like one of the late *Bagatelles*, rhythmic and emotionally driven. Wild scale figures and pompous fanfares provide Lesser with mercurial facets for his singing or waspish tone. The only full-blooded *Adagio* movement in Beethoven's cello sonata output alternates D Minor and D Major, its affect austere and funereal and prayerful and doxological. The *D Minor Adagio* proceeds chromatically--reminiscent of the slow movement of the neighboring "Gelster Trio"--a funereal, mordant lament that finally touches a dominant *A Major* chord, only to engage in a full-scale fugue for cello and piano. The askew syncopations, passing dissonances, and angular figurations testify to wry humor or to brilliant eccentricity. Paik's brittle non-legato provides a sonic foil to the rasping colors of Lesser's cello, a study in cosmic contrasts made one harmonious mystery.

The fifty-minute DVD features "my birthday present to myself," Lesser's Beethoven project as performed in Kumho Art Hall, Korea in February 2009, with extended excerpts from the *Sonata in G Minor*, the *Sonata in C Major*, and the *Sonata in D Major*. The color scheme, in black and burnished brown, corresponds to the deep tones in Beethoven's magisterial adagios. "He is full of inspiration," quips Paik on Lesser's influence. "He knows the music inside out, and I learn a lot. But I can be myself and add comments without feeling he is the 'teacher.' He does not inhibit me." Lesser's youth in LA is explored through old photos and commentary, in which he expresses deep gratitude to Gaspar Cassado and especially to Gregor Piatagorsky. Lesser's deep penetration and explication of the *A Major Sonata* proves musically and intellectually fascinating--as does his analysis of the *C Major*, *Op. 102*, No. 1--he calls the Op. 69 a kind of Sphinx. Lesser shares the joys of his 1622 Amati instrument, and we hear excerpts from *Après un rêve* by Faure and a bit of a solo Bach suite. But the real dividend, besides the live Beethoven performances before an appreciative audience, is the sense of a master cellist and musician who remains a perennial student of the instrument, a wide-eyed connoisseur who finds in Beethoven a constant miracle whose depths never cease to yield psychological and spiritual treasures.

--Gary Lernco