Reviews and Reports

BORAH BERGMAN: THE AESTHETICS OF AMBIDEXTERITY

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Liszt, under the mantic and poetic influence of 19th-century sentiment, once expressed his vocation as a virtuoso thus:

> He breathes life into the lethargic body, infuses it with fire, enlivens it with the pulse of grace and charm. He changes the earthy form into a living being, penetrating it with the spark which Prometheus snatched from Jupiter's flesh. He must send the form which he has created soaring into transparent ether: he must arm it with a thousand winged weapons; he must call up scent and blossom, and breathe the breath of life.[1]

Such images of a different age may seem quaint and comical applied to the music of today, though the fascination with the virtuoso has always remained alive. Virtuosity is extraordinary, quite outside the accepted sphere of normal, mundane activity – a phenomenon for lesser mortals to wonder at. Yet in other cultures music customarily has an 'ecstatic' function. From Bali to Brazil, through India, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and many parts of Africa, music is associated at some point with possession trance. New improvised music has evolved independently of the abstract functions of harmony, melody, and architectonics, favouring instead an aesthetic of unlimited sound-exploration. At the same time it has come to be, through the American free jazz of the mid-sixties, a vehicle for the free expression of states of exhilaration.

Borah Bergman is a true virtuoso and a highly original voice in spontaneous piano music. Comparison with Cecil Taylor reveals superficial resemblances. Both pianists demonstrate a characteristic physical energy, emotional intensity, a similar predominance of atonality (though neither would condone the application of such a misused term); but there stylistic similarities cease. More important, both have deliberately reintegrated the processes of intellectual thought into the ecstatic and spontaneous, though the ways in which they do this are utterly different. Bergman's pianistic conception is contrary to Taylor's careful constructionism. His playing is a continuous chain of intermediary states that tap the energy and flow of his thoughts as they rush by. There is no pre-structuring, but an intellectual process – the fabrication of elaborate mental images, changing relations, metaphors, fleeting visual scenarios influenced strongly by abstract expressionist painting – which fuels the fire of the music. And, as with the martial arts, the aim is always to reduce the gap between thought and action.

When asked how he felt immediately after a recent performance at the Roulette loft in New York City, Bergman replied simply, 'Calm.' For him performance is a kind of exorcism, a sudden release that follows a period of methodical, disciplined practice and accumulation of ideas and mental images. As in some other musics associated with the onset of trance, a connection with dance is evident, in this case 'a dance of the hands as they both roam the entire keyboard with a strange, illusory autonomy. To draw a parallel: the tarantella cures the victim of the tarantula bite not because of a particular virtue but because it is dance music. The physicality of movement at the keyboard allows Bergman to dip into the frantic stream of continuing ideas, to 'cure' and contain the demonic force of his mental energy. As a dance the tarantella cures not only because of its psycho-physiological effects, but because it allows the victim to identify with the tarantula that bit him. Bergman's 'tarantula' is his own background in jazz piano, towards which his feelings are ambivalent. While drawing inspiration from aspects of rhythm and articulation, he has rejected conventional jazz-piano technique because of the inequality of the hands. Traditionally almost all forms of piano music have assigned a melodic, soloistic role to the right hand and a harmonic accompanimental one to the left. Bergman's philosophy, however, stems from the premise that this division of labour is both irrelevant and inhibiting to the development of an improvisatory virtuoso technique. He has consciously abandoned these roles and has developed the hands independently of each other, so that each is capable of tackling any idea or type of material. Ambidextrousness, he believes, is the fundamental issue of contemporary keyboard improvisation.

The consequences of this system are wider than they might at first appear. First, it has led to Bergman's developing, by conventional standards, an extraordinarily powerful and facile left hand. To prove this he has displayed his skills on recordings of solo left-hand performances. Second, he has achieved such a degree of manual independence that his two hands are, in effect, two separate instruments, dissociated from each other, meeting, overlapping, tossing gestures back and forth, scurrying separate ways, each equally powerful but each having inherent individual traits. Third, in this music, which is deeply involved with stamina and callisthenics, the continuous momentum, the illusion of the indefatigable is maintained even when one or other hand rests for a few moments. The texture is thinned out but the essential musical thread is unbroken.

There seems to be something profoundly correct about this dialectical approach. The two hands considered thus become a reflection of our dual forms of experience We perceive the world in terms of inner/outer, light/dark, rational/irrational, and so on, and these dualities are an unavoidable product of the bilateral symmetry that characterises the physiognomy of Man. Musico-dialectics are implicit in our biological form and in the physiology of the brain, whose different functional areas can be considered along three axes: upper/lower, the newer, upper part controlling conscious thought-processes and movements, the lower, older part the automatic nervous system, reflexes, and unconscious body-processes; front/back, the front part being the seat of the individual ego, and the back that of the intuitive self; and right/left, the right hemisphere being the centre of vision and left-hand movement, and the left hemisphere being the verbal centre and governing right-hand movement.

The keyboard is really the ideal medium for a colloquy of hands for here they are performing ostensibly the same function. One hand is an automorphism of the other: that is, we can make a mirror image of one, an illusory back-to-front reversal, and we see two hands exactly the same. But how can this be reconciled with the fact that the keyboard represents a linear tonal range from low (left) to high (right)? The symmetry of the keyboard is not aural (the African mbira comes close to that), it is one of formal relations only. But because of the nature of Bergman's playing this 'split' does not necessarily manifest itself as an extra weightiness of the bass register. The hands, liberated from their usual pianistic roles, are freed also from their specific domains. Each has the entire keyboard at its disposal and yet the shapes of the phrases in one hand will always be different from those in the other. It is partly this inexhaustible dialogue that provides intellectual interest (in terms of improvisatory form) and forwards momentum.

Bergman's unique style of phrasing can be heard on his second record, *Bursts of Joy*.[2] There is a curious rhythmical jaggedness within these irregular torrents of notes which seems to refer back to a much earlier period of jazz history; it has an entirely different musical effect from the more regular, two-handed pummelling that has become something of a trade-mark of free jazz piano playing. Bergman dismisses this technique of fast, percussive hammering with alternate hands as rhythmically uninteresting and unpianistic, claiming that it does not realise the true potential of two hands, ten fingers, and the possibilities of a more sophisticated interaction. As the hands glide over the keyboard surface they outline certain shapes, and the fingers, ready to strike at any time, can make

any complex composite movement irrespective of the particular location. Bergman emphasises the importance of being close to the keys, for only by being so and by exercising the necessary control and digital strength can one achieve variety of attack, sustain, and touch control, and realise the true piano/forte capacity of the instrument.

The concept of an intrapersonal dialogue would seem to border on the schizophrenic, but the split personality is not an invention of modern psychiatry. Among some tribal peoples a man is believed to have a number of souls. Jung writes: 'Many primitives assume that a man has a "bush soul" as well as his own, and that this bush soul is incarnate in a wild animal or a tree, with which the human individual has some kind of psychic identity.'[3] With Bergman the dissociation is twofold; between the right and left hands, and between the conscious will and the reflexive, auto-kinetic movements of improvising. He sees close affinities between his own art and that of Jackson Pollock and the other abstract expressionists. They are all concerned with colours, shapes, and kinetic energy. Like Pollock, he works in a trance-like state of heightened awareness; thus the mental concentration goes beyond and is able to override physical problems of stamina and strength.

'The antic activities of the left hand offer gifts to the right for closer scrutiny.' The metaphorical basis of Jerome Bruner's work of cognitive psychology, *On Knowing,* is the symbolic differences between right and left hands – the one the doer, the other the dreamer.[4] The right represents order, logic, and lawfulness; the left the darker side, intuition, and spontaneity. Traditionally the left hand has been considered an awkward or clumsy counterpart of the right, its character questionable (it gave rise to the word 'sinister'). Indeed the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'left' as 'Distinctive epithet of the hand which is normally the weaker.'

Bergman believes that the left hand has been misused and neglected in piano literature, and that it has inherent talents that the right cannot reproduce. He therefore gives over the second side of *Bursts of Joy* to three solo left-hand improvisations. He actually considers the left hand to be superior in some respects to the right, not so much because of its symbolic associations but because of its construction – the thumb is on the right and therefore the weight of the hand is angled towards the highest part. Ravel explored the potential of this in the Concerto for Left Hand, particularly in the cadenza, where the theme is played by the thumb and is supported by a 'ghost harmony' of runs and arpeggios from the other fingers. The left hand is well suited to producing by itself the complete melodic/harmonic framework as can also be seen in other compositions – Skryabin's Prelude and Nocturne for the Left Hand op. 9, Leopold Godowsky's Prelude and Fugue on B – A – C – H, and the many transcriptions by the renowned one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein.

The musical substance of Bergman's left-hand solos is as solid as that of the two-handed music. The texture is thinner yet the virtuoso element is heightened by a sense of visual drama. There is a connection between the highly developed left hand and the visual aspects of piano playing that is more than coincidental. Both, we are told, are under the control of the right hemisphere of the brain. Recorded sounds create situations or landscapes in the mind's eye; we think beyond the sound to the source, and our knowledge of that source can radically alter the way in which we perceive the sound. Bergman freely associates visual images with his music. 'The piano', he says, 'is a very physical instrument.' There exists a concept of physical design relating to dance and other kinetic arts forms, which has little to do with actual sound. The clavier (dummy keyboard) is an invaluable practice tool in this respect. (Bergman owns several claviers, including a home-made portable one that fits into a small shoulder bag so that he can practise on walks and on the subway!)

Bergman recognises a certain madness in his playing, an exhilarated expressionism held in check only by a thorough background of self-evolved technique and a certainty of practice methodology and artistic aims. His prodigious facility has been built up through a rigorous system of exercises, drawing upon many different sources. Though he is an accomplished jazz (bebop) pianist, his technique is derived as much from Classical sources as from jazz. But here also he maintains a personal slant on the material and a healthy irreverence for the pedagogical tradition. Thus he will play Philippe exercises substituting expanded jazz progressions for the diminished seventh chords, apply different fingerings, conceived independently of the musical task (complex permutative systems of numbers 1-5), to scales and Hanon exercises. This develops mental attention as well as facility with awkward hand positions. Many exercises involve stretching, such as the playing of runs in parallel fifths and sixths with double-thirds fingering, or in legato ninths. The most valuable exercises, he finds, are those that involve keeping one or more fingers down while the others of the same hand play or improvise round them. This is sometimes extended to dividing the hand into two areas (1 2 (3) 4 5), which become the two parties in a one-handed dialogue. The purpose of this is to develop the capacity for polyphonic improvisation in each hand – an ideal, in fact, not far removed from Leopold Godowsky's vision of an extraordinary left-hand technique; in his preliminary remarks to his *53 Studies on Chopin's Etudes* Godowsky wrote:

> The pianoforte should benefit by the important strides which modern composition and instrumentation have made in the direction of polyphony, harmony, tone coloring, and the use of a vastly extended range in modern counterpoint. If it is possible to assign to the left hand alone the work done usually by both hands simultaneously, what vistas are opened to future composers, were this attainment to be extended to both hands![5]

Borah Bergman lives and works in New York City. He has recently toured Europe and recorded for Black Saint in Italy. Though he works mainly as a solo artist he is interested in sharing and extending his theories of musical dialectics and his experience by teaching and playing with other musicians. He is something of a recluse, and while he has been highly praised by some critics he has been overlooked by the majority. Perhaps it is for this reason more than any other that he is in the paradoxical position of being one of the world's great unknown talents.

NOTES:

[1] Quoted in Arthur Friedheim, *Life and Liszt: Recollections of a Concert Pianist* (New York: Taplinger, 1961), p. 42.
[2] Chiaroscuro Records CR 158. The only other recording by Bergman available at the time of writing is *Discovery,* Chiaroscuro CR 125.
[3] Carl G. Jung, 'Approaching the Unconscious', *Man and his Symbols,* ed. Jung and M.-L. von Franz (London: Aldus Books, 1964), p. 24.
[4] See Jerome S. Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 2-8.
[5] Quoted from Bergman's sleeve notes to *Discovery*.