

Josh Deutsch

Graduate Jazz Composition Recital

March 30, 2009

7 pm

University of Oregon, rm. 190

## What are the words “cello sonata” and “Ligeti” doing on a jazz recital?

An explanatory biographical justification for an unusual program.

When I first started piano lessons at age 5, I was lucky enough to study with a composer and pianist in Seattle by the name of Robert Kecheley. While my memory is hazy in many areas, I remember the first thing we did, which was learning George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” by ear, and then improvising on it. At that age, there was no fear of failure, or sense of impossibility. Improvising and composing were introduced as natural parts of music, and that has never really gone away in my years of studying music. When I started playing jazz in middle school, the improvisatory aspects felt like what had been missing from concert band and orchestra experiences. I continued to compose as well, and was fortunate enough to have some wonderful mentors and experiences as a composer, including having a piece played by the Seattle Symphony. When I made the decision to attend music school, a secondary question was which of these fields I would choose, since the educational system is generally determined to classify each musician as a “composer” *or* “trumpet player”, and to keep the jazz musicians far away from the classical departments.

My choice of undergraduate programs was largely based on which school would allow me to work as both a composer and jazz trumpeter, and the New England Conservatory seemed like the best fit, and allowed me to divide my studio time between the composition and improvisation faculty. During my time in Boston, I was able to work with a wonderful composition mentor, Lee Hyla, and managed to put together a decent portfolio of pieces while maintaining my primary focus in the jazz department, although I felt some frustration due to divided energies preventing mastery in either field.

When it came time to decide which field to pursue further study in, I had one formative experience. In assembling a composition portfolio to submit to graduate programs, I spent about 6 months on a piece for orchestra (writing quickly has never been a strength of mine), and the subsequent 45 minute reading by the NEC orchestra was abysmal. The realization that I’d spent that amount of time on a piece that would likely never actually be performed or rehearsed soured me on the prospect of a career primarily as a composer. As a member of a jazz group, I’m able to be a part of the rehearsal and performance process, and the people I play with view a new composition as a fun challenge, not some “modern music” that’s taking their time away from learning real music. I assumed that if I threw myself into a jazz department, I’d be able to continue on my own as a composer of chamber music, something that I was still very interested in doing, though it would no longer be a primary career option.

In the Graduate program here at the University of Oregon, I started as purely a “jazz trumpet performer” (again feeling the academic walls between disciplines), and the singular focus my first year here allowed for more growth than I’d ever experienced as a trumpeter and improviser. Constantly having one foot in another area had kept me from truly committing enough to the trumpet to gain real mastery over the instrument, and it was a breakthrough in many ways. However, when putting together a CV as an assignment for Steve Owen’s “Jazz Program Planning & Development” course, I noticed that the last entry under chamber music was in 2004, which reminded me how easy it is to let something you love doing fall by the wayside. My connection to the classical music world, especially that of 20<sup>th</sup> century composition, had really taken a back seat. As connected as the two worlds are musically, it feels like an unnecessary division.

This recital marked an opportunity to reconcile the two musical spheres that I’ve spent my life studying and working within, and that I hope to continue being a part of going forward. Whatever genre this recital is, I hope that you enjoy the music!

## **Sonata for Cello and Piano (2008)**

- I. Passacaglia
- II. Chorale/Dance
- III. V-I
- IV. Light/Dark
- V. Ballad

**Ruth Marshall, Cello**  
**Jane Harty, Piano**

## **The Ligeti Project (2009)**

for Jazz Septet

in 12 movements

\*(applaud whenever it feels like the right thing to do)

**Josh Deutsch – trumpet**  
**Chris Clark – clarinet**  
**Joe Manis – bass clarinet**  
**Ted Godbout – piano**  
**Justin Morell – guitar**  
**Josh Tower – bass**  
**Jason Palmer - drums**

## About the compositions:

### Sonata for Cello and Piano (Dec, 2008)

This piece was written for my dear friend and cellist Ruth Marshall. Ruth and I became friends during a tour our high school orchestra took to Japan in the summer of 2000. While we haven't lived in the same city any year since, we've maintained a great friendship, and have managed to reconnect on both coasts, year after year. I'd been threatening to write something for Ruth for a while, so when she called me out on this and gave me a deadline, I had no choice but to start writing. While I've spent more time the last few years in the jazz world, I've still maintained a desire to write chamber music, especially for friends and musicians I respect, of which Ruth is both.

Brainstorming for this piece started with a discussion with Ruth about some of our favorite composers, and works for cello. We have some significant overlap in taste, and the music of Eliot Carter and Gyorgy Ligeti came up right away. However, I also felt that not incorporating my jazz vocabulary would be dishonest, though the concept of writing a "jazz-inspired" cello sonata didn't sound particularly appealing. At the end of the day, I ended up just listening to a lot of music written for the cello, and trying to let go of genre and write whatever wanted to come out. This manifested over the summer as a theme and variations, which would take one primary theme, and run it through a series of different textural and stylistic filters. While I liked this ideologically, the main problem I was running into was that I didn't like the theme, and a set of variations based around an uninspired theme is tough to pull off.

So the sonata you're hearing tonight is actually an entirely different piece, without a trace of the theme & variations. Who knows, some sketches from that piece may resurface sometime in the future.

This sonata is in 5 movements, each intended as a unique statement with its own shape and language. This form borrows from my experience as a jazz musician, as this piece is intended more like a satisfying set of pieces than as one coherent, overarching statement. Each movement should feel refreshing after the last, but there aren't a lot of common themes running between movements, as there have been in my other multi-movement works. (Okay, there might be a couple...) Mostly I wanted to write something simple. This is by no means a technical showpiece for the cellist or pianist, though I think that the virtuosity and excellent musicianship of both will be on display.

Here are some brief notes about the compositional process of each movement:

#### I. Passacaglia

The three chord passacaglia running through this movement is actually taken from a sketch I wrote over a year ago, and never found a home for, although it was attempted as a jazz quintet piece, and then abandoned. The passacaglia figure is cyclical, with each of the three chords able to be heard as a resolution or a tension at any point based on where they land in the phrase. Over the top of this texture is a dialogue between the piano's right hand and the cello, intensifying until the cello rejoins the passacaglia and the tension is resolved.

## II. Chorale/Dance

The opening chorale is additive in nature, and gets “stuck” several times before finding its way to the end, only to be interrupted by the 7/8 dance rhythm. The dance has no subtle meanings, it’s just meant to groove and be fun, with a nice solo cello passage at the peak, which is as much of a technical showpiece as there is in the whole piece.

## III. V-I

The title sums up the harmonic motion through most of this movement. I wanted to take advantage of the open low strings of the cello and play with increased density of a very simple melodic and harmonic statement.

## IV. Light/Dark

One of my most influential teachers was Panamanian jazz pianist Danilo Perez, who almost never referred to scales or chords by their theoretical or functional context, but rather by their emotional or textural effect. When playing together, he would shout for me to find the “light sounds” or to “make it darker”. This movement uses two source scales, one “light” (Lydian for you theory buffs) and the other “dark” (Locrian with a double-flatted 6<sup>th</sup> degree). This movement ended up being very freely through-composed with only the alternation of the source modes as means of restriction. I’m not sure if I’m supposed to pick favorites, but I think this one came out well.

## V. Ballad

My only goal in this final movement was to write something that would really let the cello sing. I suppose the harmonic language could be called jazz-based, but I’d say it’s as much inspired by Debussy or Stravinsky as it is by Bill Evans.

## **The Ligeti Project (Jan. 2009)**

One of my favorite musicians in any genre is the late Hungarian composer György Ligeti, in particular his music for solo piano. If you haven’t heard his *Piano Etudes*, I highly recommend checking out a recording – they’re fantastic pieces of music, and they seem to me to defy genre. In doing some research on Ligeti and his *Piano Etudes*, I ended up reading quite a bit about his much earlier set of solo piano pieces, *Musica Ricercata*. It is a set of 11 pieces, the first of which is restricted to 2 notes, and each subsequent movement adds another pitch, so that the final movement uses all twelve pitches. (The second movement has gained a wide audience due to its repeated appearances in Stanley Kubrick’s “Eyes Wide Shut”). Fascinatingly, Ligeti wrote this while completely isolated from developments in Western Europe, so the final movement of *Musica Ricercata* is a twelve-tone piece in no way influenced by the Second Viennese School of Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern.

What I set out to do with this set of pieces was to use the same pitch restrictions that Ligeti did, while incorporating various influences, some from jazz, some from 20<sup>th</sup> Century classical music. Also, I decided to make it an even 12 movements, using only one pitch for the first, and working all the way up to twelve pitches in the final movement. This set of pieces was written for a jazz

septet comprised of some of my favorite improvisers and musicians. One challenge of writing chamber music for great improvisers is knowing how much to notate and how much to leave up to the performers. Each piece in this set plays with the balance between notated and improvised music. With my pitch material being restricted, I was forced to write with added weight on other musical aspects – orchestration, rhythm, dynamics, shape, form. With the exception of one movement, you won't hear music specifically derived from Ligeti's compositions, but rather an assortment of stylistic influences under the umbrella of Ligeti's compositional construct. György Ligeti passed away just three years ago, and I'd like to dedicate this piece to his memory. Whether or not it's a direct homage, I'd like to think that Ligeti would have enjoyed hearing this music.

Here are brief descriptions of each of the 12 pieces:

I. For anyone who is curious, the one note in this movement is “d”. With only one pitch to work with, this movement focuses on rhythm and tempo, with several metric modulations and a brief rhythmic section borrowed from the Ellery Eskelin trio.

II. Rather than use two defined pitches here, I took a slightly different approach. Each musician pre-selects only two pitches to use for the movement, and the notation dictates which of their notes they'll play, and when and how they'll play it. In other words, the resulting chords will be as surprising to us as they are to you.

III. This is a feature of the low instruments. Guitar and piano form an ostinato, while the bass and bass clarinet share the melodic lead, alternating with drum interplay from Jason.

IV. I'm not a huge fan of minimalism as an overall genre, but I do love the resulting poly-rhythms that are created when phrases of different lengths are repeated. This piece features an improvised guitar/trumpet/drum trio section, and then culminates with some clarinet shredding from Chris.

V. Ladies and gentlemen, Justin Morell on the guitar.

VI. I wrote this and only later realized it sounds a whole lot like another piece of mine. Oops...oh well, this is Oregon; recycling is encouraged, plus, it's a nice feature for Ted on piano. Five points if you can name the other song this sounds like.

VII. This is the one movement that pays direct homage to Ligeti, namely the seventh movement of *Musica Ricercata*, in which the pianist plays a fast ostinato in 7/8 by one hand while the other hand plays a flowing melody in an unrelated 3/4. In my version, the guitar (and later piano) loops the ostinato while the trumpet and bass clarinet exchange the melody and a counter line.

VIII. This is a semi-notated solo piece for Ted, in the stride piano style. I love stride piano, but it's really tough to play, which is why Ted is playing piano, and I'm listening. The music of Thelonious Monk may have played a role in the creation of this movement...

IX. This movement is a trumpet feature based on triadic harmony, and employs an improvised triadic background texture from the clarinet and bass clarinet.

X. Hopefully the previous 9 movements haven't been overly weighty or serious. One of the things I enjoy about being a jazz musician is that, at least part of the time, people think it's okay to enjoy themselves while listening to your music. This piece is directly influenced by the blues and New Orleans street beats. We hope you enjoy it.

XI. And now, settle down and become very serious again. This movement is incredibly profound and should be analyzed in detail to fully understand its significance.

XII. The finale—this one uses all the marbles and features the whole band. Thanks for listening!

## **Acknowledgements**

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