



Allen Shawn

FIVE PIANO SONATAS
ETUDES | FIVE PIANO PIECES

Allen Shawn, piano

TROY1739/40

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THE MUSIC

Slowly, over the past few years, Albany's progressive releases of the piano music of Allen Shawn have made it clear that this is one of the most substantial and memorable bodies of work for the instrument of any living American composer. I was privileged to write notes for the first disc in this series (Albany 317), and it showcased a composer whose range of expression, technique, and tone were enviable, even though most of the pieces were shorter, poetic, and evocative. One felt one had stumbled upon a new master of the Impromptu, that form where the pleasure of the seemingly offhand was enhanced by the emerging realization of how deeply conceived and crafted the works really were. Then, Albany 1090 brought forth a program of similar "character pieces," juxtaposed with Shawn's Second and Third Sonatas, almost all written in what seems to have been a "miracle year," 2007. With the release of Albany 1346 we had a continuation of both strands, the sketches and the more abstract sonatas, the latter of which now including of Nos. 1 and 4. And now with this collection, the sonatas are presented in their entirety, with the addition of the Fifth; and two recent sets of character pieces are also included.

It's possible for me to begin to discern a series of qualities in Shawn's piano music that help to define it, draw its distinctions from other *oeuvres*. I do feel that now, if I were to encounter a new Shawn work unannounced, I'd be able to identify him as the composer. What makes this music so distinctive?

Ironically, part of its strength and originality is the fact that it doesn't rely on any single aspect (or *shtick*) to proclaim its identity. It's a "paradoxical originality." There is a fundamental underlying attitude to the music of *deep engagement*. The music sounds as though it's been worked with for a

long time, with great patience and precision. It's not fussy or overdone; rather it feels mature, ripe. Shawn seems to be a composer who considers his pieces from every angle: they're fully thought out, carefully crafted to fit the demands of performance with an enviable balance between challenge to the player and respect for idiomatity, and search for a harmonious blend of the structural with improvisation's free spirit. Whether the pieces are the shorter, more poetic sets, or the sonatas, there's a recurrent character of *rumination*. (The composer, ever one to search for the correct word, suggests that more than an "intuitive" composer, he's an *empirical* one.) Yes, it's often contemplative, but this is not music that searches for the oblivion associated with meditative states. Rather, it's a thoughtful *reflection* on personal issues and feelings, a consideration of musical ideas and stances that are meaningful to the composer. The capacity to explore an interior world at leisure (no matter how much hard work is involved!) is a precious gift to the listener. Instead of demanding our attention or proclaiming some new discovery, instead of pointing incessantly to the self, Shawn instead invites us into his very personal "room", one that never denies an individual point of view, but which prefers to place the ego in service of the art, in hopes that it will reward the gift with revelation.

I may have seemed to wander in this introduction far afield from music, especially its more concrete, technical aspects. But part of the reason comes from Shawn's distinct profile, as he is very much a multifaceted artist. Raised in a literary milieu (his father was editor of *The New Yorker*; his brother is a renowned playwright and actor), he has carved out an additional significant career as a writer, first with an extended essay on Schoenberg that was imaginative, playful, and insightful; then as a biographer of Leonard Bernstein for the Yale "Jewish Lives" series; and finally as a memoirist, in two books that have

laid bare wrenching issues of his life and family with a clear-eyed objectivity that makes their revelations all the more brave. But Shawn is a composer first! Rather than say he's a "literary composer," the books instead reveal an approach to life that was already embodied in his music, and that helps us better grasp its essence. Shawn's music searches for *la note juste*, for the most elegant, economical, and thrilling expressive gesture, the same way a writer searches to distill his/her thought into the perfectly shaped sentence.

Again, with "paradoxical originality," Shawn's music gains its strength through the deep synthesis of its influences. There is a Stravinskian taste for clear expression and propulsive but surprising rhythmic figures. There's a French taste for impressionistic harmonies and subtly morphing ideas (not surprising in light of the composer's studies with Nadia Boulanger and student days in Paris). Less obvious but still evident is a connection to Schoenberg; the introspective quality of many of Shawn's pieces seems indebted to the middle-period, "free atonal" expressionist phase of that composer's output. I hear Ives also in the high-register firmament of his chords, where dissonances sting like pinpoints of starlight. And finally there is another very American voice, from popular roots: a love of jazz and blues, a feel for the classic showtune and Tin Pan Alley song—all never displayed in a facile manner, never a hint of classical "slumming." If this wasn't in his innermost DNA already, years of writing incidental music for the theater certainly reinforced and refined it.

And finally, there's the essential "pianism" of this music. Shawn is one of the major American composer-pianists, someone who can take on fearsome technical demands and deliver real interpretive value as he surmounts them. He's the real deal. And because he knows the instrument so well, he's able to construct textures via idiomatic figuration. Yet that figuration isn't just a knockoff

of Chopin or Debussy; it's rather its own authentic self. Looking at the scores, at times the music looks curiously inconsiderate of the instrument, yet when one then listens from without, everything makes perfect aural sense, with the fullness of sound apparent. Shawn knows all the tricks. As one small instance I marveled how he was able to take one of the hoariest clichés, tremolo, and make it sound like a natural extension of the texture he was creating at the moment. This music is full of such sleight of hand.

And yes, to the music itself. The 1982 Piano Sonata No.1 opens with the confident blast of energy of a young man: a dark, low register, propulsive bluesy shout. What follows is a journey through different perspectives on the idea, sometimes immersed in its rough-and-tumble, at times more distanced. The second movement is a theme and variations on a poignant little waltz, though its opening (a mercurial, elliptical prism of delicate running gestures) could almost be early Elliott Carter. Its evolution is so seamless that one tends to hear the different incarnations of the waltz emerging from the continuity, rather than it being a series of sectional statements. The third is dark and brooding, most notable for its final minutes: here a static cycling three-note motive emerges in the bass, above which harmonies from "another planet" rotate like a mobile. And the concluding fourth feels like a revisiting of the entire sonata, especially with its alternation of contrasting tempi and moods, and the return of the opening's "shout" in a cyclic recap. And when you think it will end, it launches into the most virtuosic music of all, a madcap coda.

In the Second and Third Sonatas, the music gets far more economical. What was a four-movement form now is three. The First was about a half hour; the next two are 18 minutes and 12 minutes respectively. The Second to me seems the most expressionistic and overtly emotive of the set, almost a record

of some sort of trauma, rendered with a journalistic precision (even though we don't know the source of the agony). The Third is even more taut. In it I hear the purest expression of a "Schoenbergian" perspective, simultaneously expressionist and rigorously objective.

Then, three years later we have the Sonata No.4. Its spirit seems driven by a new openness, a return to light. Its first movement feels elegiac, beginning with a spacious, consonant progression, with the stateliness of a procession, that then moves into more rhythmically active material. The second is one of the spaciest of the entire cycle, an extended reverie, which feels like a single singing line, constantly mutating through different states. Its dark murmur makes me think of "Le Gibet" from Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*. And the final movement is among the most joyous music the composer has written, a Latin-tinged dance rippling with note-cascades and exuberant energy.

All of which leads to the fifth sonata. Over the cycle I've felt that Shawn's music has been constantly gaining in *economy* and *focus*. The pieces have become more compact (from Nos.1-3), and the materials more concentrated (No. 4 opens up again in length, but now its movements are each centered more on a single idea than ever before). He's progressively accomplishing more and more with ever fewer, more restricted resources. But paradoxically (again) this is liberating; it frees Shawn to reach more intense and expansive expression. All these tendencies merge in No.5. Here we have music that is far more continuous and darker than anything in the set up to this point. The composer has written (to me) of this work being "painterly," and I can both see and hear that. There is a balance of elements, a careful calibration of harmonic color that seems more related to *space* than *narrative* (the composer also references Mark Rothko). The score demarcates a series of sections through which are obvious

changes of tempo and texture, and an accumulation of energy and rhythmic drive. But all is still *attacca*, and the overall impression is of a single continuous movement. There is a slow deep, "watery" undulation in the first several minutes, all based on a single sonority (shades of Schoenberg's *Farben*), that gradually accumulates a motivic profile, which in turn eventually blossoms into the rich concluding fanfares near the end. It suggests *nobility* in its unfolding: the term may be a little out of favor nowadays, but it deserves a comeback—not in the sense of patrician elitism, but in that of deep, thoughtful character; integrity; and substantive ambition. The work falls into a tradition that's not large, but one I personally value deeply: the piece that is really a single thing throughout, so gradually mutating that you always are always arriving somewhere new, but you never know how you got there. (Although from the orchestral repertoire, the lodestar here is the Sibelius Seventh). Despite being an essay in inevitability, the sonata is formally *thrilling*; even when you know where it's going, where it *has* to go, it still surprises.

To conclude we have two more sets, which while formally looser than the sonatas, still show Shawn as a composer who scrupulously organizes the correspondences between materials that seem on the surface casually related. The nine Etudes for Piano (2016-17) started as a set of three (written for Eunbi Kim), and then the composer added the remaining six. The work moves freely from one expressive state to another, but underneath there is an organizing structure: for example, the harmonic basis of #1-3 is mirrored at the end when it is retrograded through #7-9. As etudes, some are studies in actual pianistic technique, such as the first and sixth, which stress melodic motion of multiple notes in each hand. Others stress dazzling runs that weave through every register. (And at this point attention must be paid to Shawn's extraordinary gift as

a pianist. His lightness and fleetness of touch has given the entire body of his keyboard *oeuvre* a distinctive, identifying sound, a perfect complement to the ringing, rich harmonies of his chordal textures.) And others still are essays in conveying particular expressive states, through sensitivity to dynamics, touch, and color.

The Five Pieces for Piano (#1-4 2013, #5 added in 2015, all revised 2017) projects a symmetric arch form, and even feels like a “semi-sonata” to me: the sequence of movements leads to a genuine climax in the fourth, and the finale, a lullaby, is an ideal coda. It was written for the same pianist for whom the Fourth Sonata is dedicated, Julia Bartha, and perhaps shares some of the spirit of that earlier work. If there is an ancestor hovering over the piece I'd say Schumann, and not only because of the middle movement's title *Blumenstück*. There is fantasy throughout the set, especially in the two scherzi (movements two and four), the first driven more by pointillist writing skittering over the entire keyboard, the latter exuberant in pantonal fanfares, bursting with an energy that feels straight from Broadway.

A bit like Prospero bidding farewell, Shawn leaves us with music whose touch is light, bespeaking grace and poignancy. Listen carefully, here is the work of a deep spirit, and a masterful artist.

—Robert Carl is chair of composition at the Hartt School, University of Hartford. He is also the author of *Terry Riley's In C* (Oxford University Press).

THE COMPOSER

Composer **Allen Shawn** (born 1948) grew up in New York City and moved to Vermont in 1985 to be on the music faculty of Bennington College. In addition to his piano music, his works include a Symphony; Concertos for Piano, Cello, Violin, and Oboe, and a Double Concerto for Clarinet and Cello; Music for string orchestra and other large ensembles; three Chamber Operas; Choral, Vocal and Chamber Music. Recordings of his work on Albany Records include three volumes of piano music (TROY317, TROY1090, TROY1346); *Allen Shawn-Chamber Music* (TROY683); *Allen Shawn-Music for Cello* (TROY1626); his *Piano Concerto*, performed by Ursula Oppens with the Albany Symphony, conducted by David Alan Miller (TROY441); and works performed by Palisades Virtuosi (on TROY1022) and the Chamber Music Conference and Composers Forum of the East (on TROY777). Additional recordings include his Chamber Opera *The Music Teacher*, with a libretto by his brother, playwright Wallace Shawn (Bridge Records); the CD *Allen Shawn-Piano Music* performed by pianist, Julia Bartha (Coviello); and *Three Dance Portraits* performed by the piano duo ZOFO (Sono Luminus). Shawn is also the author of four books: *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey*; *Wish I Could Be There*; *Twin*; and *Leonard Bernstein—An American Musician*.

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Dedications:

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Piano Sonata No. 5 for Susan Sgorbati

Etudes 1-3 for Eunbi Kim

Five Piano Pieces for Julia Bartha

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