

Ruminations on Words by Charles Bernstein

This work began with an effort to find a text that would be suitable to complement a program about self-reflection, the epiphanies that come from them, and the newly “woke” mindset that results once they’ve been had. I first encountered Bernstein’s text when watching the archived Public Access Poetry videos curated by the Poetry Project; this particular video originally aired on December 29th, 1977. The text presents so eloquently a problem that any self-reflective human might consider—that we feel a constant exigency towards achievement, or fulfillment, or completion, but the light at the end of the tunnel never seems to get closer (how relevant to this day it remains!). After delving into the text, I put on my headphones and improvised to the sounds of his words. This improvisation became the piano part of the piece, off of which all other parts were based, so it is thusly called a “ruminations” and is (or was) meant to simply accompany the text, which decidedly would remain in its original form as a part of the piece instead of being sung by the chorus, not to be overshadowed by any sense of thematic development or melody.

The piece turned into one that simply remarked on the problem. How do we use our time? How to we seek fulfillment? Are we constantly missing the big picture? As with most creative endeavors, it became (and is currently) more of a self-exploration than an objective remark on modern society... In searching for an accompanying text for the chorus, I thought of the Buddhist practice of mantra (cyclic, reflective, timeless) as something that would be complimentary. The particular one that is used, known as “Dependent Arising” or “Codependent Origination” is at the heart of Buddhist thought, and so two forms of it are included: the original Sanskrit, which makes up the bulk of the choral text, but also the Tibetan invocation of the same concept, included as a quote of the actual Tibetan Buddhist chant. “This being, that becomes.” and “This not being, that does not become” seems like a very basic way of acknowledging cause and effect, but when seen through the Buddhist point of view, it is much more consequential—that there is a chain of events (ie. causes) that result in rebirth, pain, suffering, and death, and only by breaking this chain can liberation be achieved. This is a gross oversimplification of this philosophy, but I became obsessed with how relevant it was to the problem that Bernstein posed in his poem. That the choral parts (which had already been written) were incredibly drawn out and chant like was seemingly providential.

What has resulted can best be described as “Disjointed Homogeny.” Every part stands on its own (in the sense that they do not often interact, but simply exist within the same harmonic world (itself a construct)), but each would be exceedingly boring absent the context of the other parts. Though the piece does not present any overt thematic material, the two-note rise and fall motive is shared by all the instruments in their own way, though almost never at the same time. The C dorian mode in which everything swirls is meant to signify the (false?) notion that we live and strive towards something within boundaries of the “correct” way, in order for things to be achieved. The two-note motive is meant to signify that each of us in our own way and in our own time make these attempts, and while they are not always harmonious, they do create a homogenous societal fabric when you “zoom out” enough. Ultimately, however, everything just keep cycling, without progression, without modulation, without (much) development; there are no two measures in this work that are alike, and yet it all sounds the same. Instruments start and stop their momentum in the middle of measures, and nothing quite lines up, even at moments of resolution or impact.

Then there is the mantra... the juxtaposition of this mantra does not (necessarily) serve as some kind of proposed solution to Bernstein’s quandary, but as a means of “zooming out” in history to see how the same problem was considered and pondered upon thousands of years ago by Gautama Buddha himself. This problem of the never-ending cycle is itself a cycle, constantly experienced by humanity, repeated innumerable times by Buddhists as a (cyclic) mantra (itself a reflection on cyclicism and how to break out of it).

The piece began as a way to make people (or myself) consider how they use their time, how they perceive their own sense of development, and that there can be a simple if not profound comfort in knowing that we all face “this harsher necessity” in a beautifully disjointed homogeny. It developed into something of a sermon, that nothing changes if nothing changes, and that if we “stop looking with such anticipation” we could break the cycle. But perhaps in the end, at least when it comes to my own understanding of the problem, it simply “is, as well, a sort of postponement.”

-Alec Davis