

COLLECTION
FUNDACIÓN BBVA - NEOS

Pathétique

Yun – Beethoven - Yun
Isang Yun (1917-1995)

ISANG YUN:

Born in South Korea in 1917, jailed for his part in the resistance to the Japanese invasion, introduced to the twelve-tone technique in Europe in the mid 1950s, and resident in Berlin since 1964, save for a two-year interruption when he was kidnapped and imprisoned in Seoul for his communist ideas, Isang Yun was eventually to die in the German capital in 1995. Son of the poet Yun Hi Hyon, his biography presages some of the motifs in the considerable output of an artist who began writing music at the age of 14. These experiences and his reflection: "A composer cannot view the world in which he lives with indifference. Human suffering, oppression, injustice... all that comes to me in my thoughts" give us a deeper insight into the content of this record. On the one hand, we have the tragic sentiment of Yun's scores, sagely echoed by Kaya Han on the piano during Beethoven's Grande Sonate Pathétique. On the other, we have the transparent organization of his notes, midway between the French impressionists, thanks to his apprenticeship in Paris with Pierre Revel, and the practice of atonality acquired in Berlin with Schönberg's disciple Josef Rufer. Perhaps Yun's most personal quality is the way he opens these windows so the listener can pass smoothly between the two ambiances; using as nexus his musical roots embedded in the Taoist tradition. Hence we move from the grandeur of the works opening and closing this selection to the minimalist transparency of the five pieces for piano that precede Ludwig van Beethoven's monumental creation.

however on Shao Yang Yin, a nomenclature that is first met in the first edition, which appeared in 1968: “Shao Yang Yin, the Chinese title of the composition, lies readily to hand, reminding us of taoistic teachings and the great dichotomy of ‘yang yin’, states which complement each other. The addition of ‘shao’ (= small, light) makes clear that everyday opposites (moods, states, temporal processes) are carried over into the realm of music.”

The premiere took place during the time that witnessed the kidnapping of Yun in West Berlin by the South Korean secret service and his deportation to Seoul, where he was subjected to imprisonment and torture on the basis – under South Korean law – of his forbidden contacts to North Korea (June 1967 to early 1969): in Basel in September 1967 Antoinette Vischer made an LP recording of Shao Yang Yin for the Wergo label; the first public performance of the work was in Freiburg im Breisgau on 12th January 1968 by Edith Picht-Axenfeld. Yun started work on the composition on 5th November 1966, writing the following lines to Antoinette Vischer: “I am not going to view the piece [as] just something to do in the meantime, but [as] a real work to which I am dedicating by best efforts!” On 14th December 1966 he commented about the completion of the score: “I did not want to indulge in any unusual experimentation. I simply do not understand the instrument well enough. [It is] an atmospheric, lyrical musical work, sometimes with brilliant bridge passages but also delicate, gliding sections between phrases.”

Two days later he approached Antoinette Vischer again: “By now you will certainly have received the manuscript and a letter from me. I forgot to say: the performance markings in the piece are certainly not harpsichord-like. The reason: the work must also be playable on the piano. The markings are therefore mainly applicable to the piano only.”

The first edition of Shao Yang Yin designates the work for harpsichord. Isang Yun’s wish for a new edition – for a copy of an historic harpsichord on the one hand and for piano on the other hand – could only be realised in the Autumn of 1996, that is to say subsequent to his death on 3rd November 1995.

The piano edition by Kaya Han and a harpsichord edition with Edith Picht-Axenfeld’s new registrations marked in colour only appeared in 1998. The very way a version for piano was won lends it the character of an interpretation: Kaya Han had to make many decisions for or against octave transpositions, and these choices can only partly be justified with regard to harpsichord registrations. In order to render effectively the expressive character and colours of the musical gestures, she used the extreme registers of the modern concert grand. And although she was able to draw upon her familiarity with traditional East Asian music, it was her direct cooperation with Yun himself, and her experience as an interpreter of his piano works and chamber music that told in the end.

Traces of her intense study of the piano output of the Schönberg school become apparent in the Five Pieces for Piano (1958), the first work of his canon that Isang Yun had published in Europe. In order to become part of the New Music movement emerging within the Western avant-garde, Yun left Seoul for Paris in 1956, arriving in 1957 in Berlin, where he studied with the Schönberg pupil Josef Rufer, among others. The Five Pieces are – if not dogmatic – serially composed through and through, and demonstrate elements of motivic-thematic working. Everything has been reduced to the bare necessity: expression and musical language, each phrase, each formal section contrasts with and is won from previous material, or is a variation developed from such musical content. Each of these interrelated works, which in the end form a cycle, admits a different gestural quality. The first piece is “expository” in nature; the second is melodic – Yun called it “romance-like”; the third he called “motoric”; the fourth was for him a “rondo with a giocoso character”, and the fifth piece was a kind of “coda”, which summed up “like a mosaic” the musical material presented in the previous pieces. The thematic core of the second piece – a falling minor third and a semitone – pays homage to Schönberg’s Klavierstück op. 11 no. 1 as well as to the sound world of Alban Berg.

Interludium A (1982): by the time of the Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra (1975/76) the “main note” A had without doubt become for Isang Yun a cipher for harmony, purity and perfection. In formal terms the A in Interludium fashions an axis of symmetry and of reflexion. The note A appears insistently in several octaves, becoming an axis in tonal space and the centre of symmetrical choral agglomerations; it is present, too, as an imaginary centre of reference, also where the music is hollowed out. It is as if this note is being viewed under shifting light conditions. After Ravel’s *Le Gibet* (The Gallows) from *Gaspard de la Nuit* and the Tenth Piano Sonata by Alexander

Skriabin, Interludium A is the most decided attempt in the history of piano music to examine a single note. The overall form of Yun’s composition may be interpreted as tripartite but also as being in five parts. Interludium A begins with an introductory passage built from massive chords, ones which – read from the bottom to the top – are presented in the most extreme registers of the piano. By drawing on melismatic twists and turns and by providing a wealth of ornamental detail, Yun aims to render unyielding chordal agglomerations more readily plastic. In a meditative and melancholy slow section, which once again enters a darker mood and only gradually

reaches the higher registers, Yun returns to the main note A, and various other chromatic neighbours. A lively bridge passage renders more sinuous and fluid previously quite static elements. Use of variation technique allows Yun to combine ever-expanding melismas with upward and downward movements, ending in a series of domains typified by trills. The rigid chords return one last time. And it is perhaps with a sense of forgiving that Yun lets the most delicate prospects of sound emerge within the quiet closing dynamics of an extended finale.

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