



serialist approach in her early works. Her later pieces have become more accessible, and “Big Sky” is one of the loveliest of her recent compositions. In this single-movement work lasting seven minutes, one can still hear the initial serialist impulse in many of the half-step dissonances. But she nonetheless fashions the piece around tonal centers. It contains a feature common to several of her recent works - “a minor third expanding to a major one” according to music critic Kyle Gann. Tower provided an *A B A* format for “Big Sky,” opening and closing with soft passages and long sustained notes dominated by the strings. The powerful climax comes in the prolonged central section, with the piano leading the way in a pounding and forceful rhythmic style. The strings provide motivic, chamber oriented counterpoint, often moving in parallel rhythmic patterns but contrasting directions. Tower develops the return of the final “A” section into a serene closing coda of great breadth.

RAN

SOLILOQUY (1997)

Shalomit Ran, born in 1949, is an American composer of Israeli birth. She matriculated at Tel Aviv Academy, then continued her musical studies in America with such composers as Norman Dello Joio, Dorothy Taubman and Ralph Shapey. Ran joined the University of Chicago faculty in 1973, and served as composer-in-residence for both the Chicago Symphony (1990-91) and Chicago Lyric Opera (1994-97). Many of her works contain elements from her Middle-East heritage. Over the years, her compositions won numerous grants and awards from such prestigious institutions as the Rockefeller, Ford and Guggenheim Foundations, and she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1992.

Two of Ran’s earlier compositions contributed to *Soliloquy*. She wrote the opera “Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk)” for the Chicago Lyric Opera 1995-97. In 1995 she then set a portion of the opera for violin and string orchestra, entitled “The Yearning” and written for Yehudi Menuhin. Both the string setting and “Soliloquy” include material from an early soliloquy by the opera’s central character, Khonnon. The modal, almost whole-tone violin melody and some of the improvisatory trills reflect Middle-Eastern traditions. Ran bases much of “Soliloquy” on the rising line of the initial violin melody in the opening, elegiac section. Though first the cello and then the piano (with greater intensity and dissonance) share this material, Ran views the violin as the “emotional center” of the piece.

MENDELSSOHN

PIANO TRIO NO. 1 IN D MINOR, OP. 49 (1839)

By 1839, when Mendelssohn wrote the first of his two piano trios, he dominated German musical culture. He traveled extensively as an internationally acclaimed piano virtuoso in the 1820s and 30s, and had already written his two piano concertos (1831 and 1837) and most of the influential piano character pieces “Songs Without Words” (beginning in 1829). Mendelssohn had written all but the last of his six string quartets, including the three Op. 44 quartets (1837-38) in the blissful and productive period following his marriage in 1837. His orchestral compositions included all the early string symphonies, the overture to *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1826), the concert overtures *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* (1828), *Hebrides* (1830) and *Ruy Blas* (1839). Mendelssohn’s famous 1829 concert of the *St Matthew Passion* helped bring Bach’s music back into public prominence. And he continued this historical approach as conductor of the prestigious *Gewandhaus Orchestra* in Leipzig (1835-45), championing both previous composers (Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, among others) as well as the modern greats. No other German musician held so many prominent positions, and his early death in 1847 at age 38 was mourned internationally.

After Beethoven and Schubert established the four-movement form for the piano trio, this particular genre declined somewhat in mid-century. Too many composers turned to it as piano virtuosos, and wrote overpowering keyboard parts, with the strings treated as an afterthought. Mendelssohn’s piano part indeed reflects his own skills, but he was already too accomplished a chamber composer to relegate the strings to secondary importance. He arrests those fears immediately, as the cello presents the opening theme of the massive, 600-bar sonata form first movement. The strings also contribute important transition and secondary themes as well. The delightful slow movement, an *Andante* in *A B A* form, features a quintessentially Romantic theme that few 18th-century composers would have written. The opening theme

of the “B” section, introduced by the piano, begins in one key (Bb minor) and ends in another (Db Major). To make sure we understood this, Mendelssohn repeats the theme to close the “B” section as well.

Mendelssohn’s third movement, a lively Scherzo, also reflects the mid-century approach to this form. Typical of the era, Mendelssohn writes no Trio section (unlike Beethoven), and he avoids the usual 18th-century triple meter as well. Instead he provides a very quick movement in 6/8 meter and sonata-rondo form. And it is quick indeed, as he offers the first contrasting episode only 30 seconds into the piece - a light, staccato 4-bar theme for the violin, restated immediately by the cello. Once again he turns to the strings at an important structural joint. He sets the initial appearance here in the key of the dominant, but it returns near the end of the movement in the tonic. The central rondo episode of the Scherzo features a development section of myriad keys and appearances of the main thematic motives. Mendelssohn then fashions a much broader sonata rondo movement for the finale, which again reinforces the string’s role. Listen for the second episode in this rondo. He provides a broad, lyrical theme for the cello in F Major, and its later return provides Mendelssohn the opportunity to close his most popular and tuneful trio in a triumphant D Major mode.

Program notes by Ed Wight