

An Interview with Justin Henry Rubin on Performing New Music

T.I.I.: We've talked a lot about your composing, but we haven't touched on your performing as much. Of special interest, of course, is your involvement with *new music*.

J.H.R.: I like to broaden that idea into *music of our time*, since the greater amount of the literature of the 20th century is still hardly known to concert audiences, and that is what I want most to change.

T.I.I.: You often program works, indeed composers, who are also not readily recognized by the public.

J.H.R.: Yes. I feel that although I have a great closeness with Schönberg's music, for instance, that there are still many pianists who have his music in their repertory. Although I have played many of his solo works before, I don't keep them up and fresh as others do, simply because I am involved in so many other projects that I have to choose what is most important for me to play, and that is specifically works that American pianists and organists simply don't program. Hugo Distler is an example of a very important composer in Germany where I'm sure lots of organists study the richness and complexity of his scores and perform throughout the country. Here, rarely do you see this kind of enthusiasm or *dedication* to his writing that would bring about a performance that would inspire the listener to dig deeper into this literature. That's why I do it – I believe in his music and think that it is still relevant some seventy years after his suicide. Realize, I also take the same care and patience with early music that is unjustifiably unheard in concert. You'll always see some early Iberian or North German music on my programs. I mean, who needs another Bach prelude and fugue? It all gets very boring and repetitive that way. I get turned off when I see these super-conventional organ programs ad nauseum, and you'd think pianists who want to do Baroque music would think that there's more out there than Bach and Scarlatti! Bartok began looking into these possibilities and I'd like to see more young pianists take his model. I think, though, that the key word is *dedication*, because some of the new music is at a difficulty level where many performers are just not going to put in the effort into get it right and risk spending all that time on a composer that might just not go over very well with audiences, or simply not have enough venues to justify the time spent.

T.I.I.: But you have had these opportunities?

J.H.R.: Well, enough. I have really three concurrent professions: that of a composer, a performer, and educator (in that order). And five concerts a year or so is sufficient for me and my schedule. That way, I can present the music with optimal preparation time. Should I do more, one of the others would suffer, or the music would suffer in performance and that is something I won't tolerate. With Distler, I always feature at least one piece of his on all of my organ programs. Twice I have dedicated entire recitals to his chorale partitas. With Xenakis, I was lucky enough to be a part of a group [ST-X

Ensemble] that specialized in his music. It's tough stuff – to practice, to rehearse ensemble-wise, to perform... but the work for me is there and I can spend the time. We've played in Europe and America and the receptions we've received have been wonderful. When artists really concentrate on bringing a composer's compositions to life, even a 'difficult' case like Xenakis, and to enrich the experience of the audience through careful interpretation, then the sensitive listening audience I think will always respond. With this particular ensemble, we've been playing this single man's oeuvre for six years and have developed a perspective, a dialogue almost with the stuff and can make the most of all the situations he puts the musicians into. I don't care for doing a hard new piece just for the sake of its difficulty if I don't think it will make contact with the listener. Of course that's my job, but I just feel empty after seeing a wall of pyrotechnics without any substance (that goes for any era of music).

T.I.I.: Well, getting now to the completely opposing styles within the gamut of new music, how is preparing for a Distler concert different than a Xenakis concert.

J.H.R.: First off, I have never done a whole Xenakis program solo, there's just not enough pieces and actually I only have performed one, *Herma*, here and abroad. So with Xenakis, I'm always looking back at the full score and imagining how I will fit into the ensemble and take my interpretation from there, and then expect to be guided by the conductor and what I'm hearing in rehearsal from the other players. But with Distler, I have to do it all on my own and search to find the core tempi of a piece, the right everything before I even begin practicing the notes. Of course, now I have a solid idea about how I'm going to play this piece or that one by Distler since I've been doing all of them for some years now, but I always try to re-learn them when preparing for a concert. That's the key to making it fresh – both for the audience and myself.

T.I.I.: Also, isn't the writing and technical aspects of performing these two composers in itself totally different?

J.H.R.: Yes. You see, with Distler, I have to start each phrase by taking it apart into its component elements and seeing how shades of harmony and nuances in rhythm make everything blend and then put it back together in practice. It's a very detailed way of working. But with Xenakis, the music does not live in these types of details but in the larger gestures. So I start with *them* and work through the details of the nature of each line as I become more familiar with the grand shapes overall. Another point I have to both admit and stress, is the fact that most of his music I take as a kind of super-controlled improvisation. I mean, the performers can take great liberties with both the notes and rhythms but still the piece remains, to my mind, intact. When you look at, say, the score to *Eonta* or *Dikhthas* or *Synaphai* – you'll come back with an outlook that all of these works have supremely difficult piano parts, but I look at them and don't worry about all the stuff going on. It's all a visual approximation of what he envisions. Now with the beatings and microtones and when groups of instruments line up rhythmically here and there or where specific notes or chords keep coming back, that's another idea altogether which you have to carefully work out and get right. It's *action* music overall, though. Recordings, although valuable as documents and getting people interested, are

the worst representation of this kind of music. Xenakis I was told once remarked that he wanted at least 80% of the notes and rhythms to be correct in performance – but what 80%? Some parts need to be 100% all the time while others could scarcely be heard as being accurate or not regardless how one plays the notes – as long as the *condition* of each moment remains. His gestures are sometimes in broad strokes, or other times like little characters that appear and vanish almost simultaneously, or stacked colors, or textural approaches. But as far as the details in a great deal of his music are concerned, I'm not concerned about practicing them as it doesn't come out in performance anyway. What I spend most of my time on with them is in projecting the essence of the music and molding the individual strands in his sometimes torrential current of sound in an expressive manner. Detached interpretation, if you will. He's one of the very few composers that can be dealt with this way and it's a lot tougher than I'm making out here, perhaps. In a way it's very elegant what he has created with this ambivalent flux between the attitudes that the performers are faced with at every turn in his work; it lies somewhere between a dream fantasy world where everything is unclear but also distinct, and a rigid aggressiveness like a military drill. But with both composers, Distler and Xenakis, you have to maintain an atmosphere of spontaneity.