



Sapphires and serpents

Piano music by Graham Newcater

Newcater portrait: Aryan Kaganof, 2017

Programme

25 January 2018, 7pm

The three piano compositions by Graham Newcater that we will hear tonight carry descriptive titles that refer to fountains, serpents and sapphires. The image of sapphires perhaps suggests that we are invited into a play of sound and light and words as reflected from crystal surfaces of gemstones: The cut faces of the sapphire represent the glimpses from varying angles that a live recital, a recent film, and a paper response each bring to the creative work of Graham Newcater. The vitality and movement of serpents and fountains remind us of our participation, as audience, in the porousness of openings into creating, playing, critical thinking and public reflection. Thank you for your attendance – Marietjie Pauw, event curation.

Aryan Kaganof, film

OF FICTALOPES AND JICTOLOGY

Mareli Stolp, recital

Chromatic Serpent, 2016

Fountains (dedicated to Mary Ann de Villiers), 2012

Sapphire Sonata, 2016

Stephanus Muller, response

In search of Graham Newcater

Programme notes, by Mareli Stolp

Early in January of 2017, I sat down to begin learning a piece called *Sapphire Sonata*, by South African composer Graham Newcater. He had given me a copy of the work the previous September, when Stephanus Muller and I visited him at his home in Johannesburg. A substantial composition of roughly 25 minutes, this was one of the works for solo piano written by Newcater since his return to composition in 2011: he had not composed any music for about fifteen years, and even before he stopped composing he had hardly ever written for solo piano, focusing instead on large-scale orchestral and ensemble compositions. A commission in 2011 from the SAMRO Foundation for a virtuoso solo piano work for the 12th UNISA International Piano Competition encouraged Newcater to begin composing again. He has since composed only solo piano music, and has by now completed eight new works in this genre.

Graham Newcater began composing as a teenager in the 1950s after making contact with Erik Chisholm, the then director of the South African College of Music in Cape Town. Chisholm introduced Newcater to the composer Arnold van Wyk. They started to correspond by mail, and Van Wyk examined his

scores and sent him feedback. Newcater visited Van Wyk in Cape Town in December 1958 and during this occasion Van Wyk played him a recording of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto. This was Newcater's first exposure to twelve-tone music, and it had a significant impact. The composer relates how he immediately bought a pocket score of the composition and immersed himself in it, effectively discovering the twelve-tone (dodecaphonic) method through self-study. He would remain committed to this compositional method throughout his life.

Newcater was born in Johannesburg in 1941 and the family moved to Natal in the late-1950s. After completing a degree in mechanical engineering at the Natal Technical College, he returned to Johannesburg in 1958 to work in the motor car industry, whilst having occasional composition lessons with Gideon Fagan. Fagan, although enthusiastic about Newcater's talent, did not fully appreciate his commitment to twelve-tone music. In 1962 Newcater won the first South African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO) composition scholarship, which enabled him to study for two years in London at the Royal College of Music with Peter Racine Fricker. Fricker was a significant figure of the post-war British avant garde. Although his music was decidedly different from the mainstream folk-song inspired British music popular at the time, he never abandoned tonality altogether. Fricker did not compose using the twelve-tone or the serialist method (the latter, developed by composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen is an extension of Schoenberg's twelve-tone method to all musical parameters, including rhythm, timbre and duration). It was only in 1966, when Newcater returned to London with a Ralph Vaughn Williams Grant, that he received tuition from a composer versed in the twelve-tone method. Newcater studied for six months with Humphrey Searle, one of the few British composers to take up dodecaphony and the only British student of Anton Webern, who together with Schoenberg and Alban Berg constituted the Second Viennese School.

Newcater's career received a significant boost when he returned to South Africa in late-1966: he received a commission from the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT) to compose music for a ballet based on N.P. Van Wyk Louw's epic poem *Raka*. The ballet was premièred in August 1967. Newcater was recommended as composer for the project by Edgar Cree (conductor of the SABC Orchestra at the time). Cree had been impressed by Newcater's First Symphony, which he had conducted in 1966. The ballet was a big success, and was performed several times across the country after its première. It was also filmed (directed by Alf Travers) and distributed by Twentieth Century Fox. Newcater received sufficient royalties from the film to enable him to purchase property in the Turffontein area in Johannesburg. This provided him sufficient financial freedom to devote himself fully to composition.

Graham Newcater's compositional output is substantial, and consisted during the 1960s and 1970s mostly of orchestral works and some ensemble compositions. His First Symphony had international performances in Paris and Brussels, and his Philharmonic Overture in Asunción and Montevideo. His productivity decreased markedly during the 1980s and 1990s, to the extent that when he received the SAMRO commission in 2011 his wife, Mary

Ann de Villiers, had no idea that he was a composer. She professed not to know that he 'had anything at all to do with music', and thought that he made his living from renting out the properties he had bought in the 1960s. She had not seen *Raka*, nor had she ever heard the music. By his own account, Newcater had stopped thinking of himself as a composer. This makes his creative resurrection, the results of which you will hear tonight, all the more remarkable.

The compositions performed this evening represent a small part of Newcater's output since 2011: *Fountains*, composed between 2011 and 2012, is dedicated to Mary Ann; *Chromatic Serpent* and the *Sapphire Sonata* were both completed in 2016. Other works subsequently completed are *Toccata Seconda*; *Sonatina*; *From the Garden of Forever*; *Sonic Poems* and *Nocturnal Variations*.

The opening of *Chromatic Serpent* carries the indications 'maestoso e ben marcato' (majestic and accented or 'marked'), and when I performed the work for the composer he added the word 'stern'. When I asked about the title of the work, Newcater explained that it was inspired by the *Tree of Life* as described in Kabbalah, an esoteric method, discipline and school of thought that originated in Judaism. In some interpretations or representations of the *Tree of Life*, a serpent is coiled around the tree: it is this 'Serpent of Wisdom' that constitutes the title of *Chromatic Serpent*.

Fountains can be described as a short character piece: an opening evocative of flowing water is contrasted with passages consisting of alternating patterns of triplet and semi-quaver rhythms traversing the range of the keyboard; virtuosic material interrupts the peaceful flow of the music several times. The piece is assembled around two chordal structures that are interlaced with a careful economy of material.

The final work on tonight's programme is *Sapphire Sonata*, and the title again has connotations to Kabbalah: 'sapphire' is related to *sefirot*, the Hebrew word for 'emanations', or 'giving out'. In Kabbalah there are ten emanations, attributes or creative forces that intervene between the infinite, unknowable God and the created world. The Infinite reveals itself through the *sefirot*; the sapphire, a brilliant gemstone that reflects light, is an agent of light and illumination. This large-scale work is in four movements. The first movement consists of three main sections that are thematically related, with two slower and softer sections interspersed between them. This is followed by a slow second movement, constructed entirely on two statements of the whole tone scale. A virtuosic and dynamically powerful section interrupts the almost impressionistic character of the movement. The third movement presents itself as a minuet, with a charming dance-like character that is frequently interrupted by changes in metre and *ritardandi*. The three-part form of this movement includes a virtuosic middle section contrasting with the slow, dance-like outer sections. The finale opens with a *maestoso* section somewhat reminiscent of the

piano music of Franz Liszt; this is followed by a section characterised by syncopation and a driving pulse. It is the only movement that is in recognisable sonata form: a slow middle section is followed by a reprise of the opening material, and the movement ends with a coda.

Newcater's continued commitment to the twelve-tone method in the present could be interpreted as somewhat anachronistic. This method (which later developed into total serialism, the method preferred at the Darmstadt Summer Courses of the later 1940s and 1950s, especially by Pierre Boulez) was considered the ultimate expression of musical modernism after World War II, but became supplanted as a compositional aesthetic by amongst others the indeterminacy philosophies of John Cage, the development of electronic music, the minimalist movements of the 1960s and the advent of so-called 'world music' during the later twentieth century. Very few composers today still utilise it as a compositional method; there are certainly no South African composers who do so. In a way Newcater has always been out of step with his contemporaries. During the 1950s and 1960s, when dodecaphony and serialism were arguably considered the most important tools for expression of musical modernism, no other South African composers of Newcater's generation became known for writing twelve-tone music. In England, where Newcater received his only formal music tuition in the 1960s, serialism was not commonly taught or engaged with. Graham Newcater can be described as a musical maverick: a one-of-a-kind creator who has forged his own path. Newcater's music could be interpreted as an example of contemporaneity as articulated by Giorgio Agamben, who writes:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it, nor adjust themselves to its demands.

Graham Newcater's music is neither wholly of this time nor any other time. It is, uniquely (or untimely), Graham Newcater.

Mareli Stolp completed Bachelor of Music (2002) and Master of Music (2006) degrees at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, as a student of Joseph Stanford. From 2003 to 2006 she was a student at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam in the Netherlands, where she studied with Håkon Austbø. She completed a Bachelor of Music Degree in Amsterdam in 2006, specialising in music of the 20th Century. Since returning to South Africa in 2006, Mareli has been active as performer and teacher, with engagements at the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (2008, 2009, 2011), The Standard Bank National Arts Festival (2013) and Aardklop National Arts Festival (2009, 2010). She completed an Artistic Research PhD at the University of Stellenbosch with Professor Stephanus Muller in 2012. Since then she has held positions as a full time lecturer at Rhodes University, Grahamstown and as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the University of KwaZulu Natal.

Aryan Kaganof is a project of African Noise Foundation.

Stephanus Muller is Professor of Musicology at Stellenbosch University and Director of Africa Open. He is also the Principal Investigator of the Andrew W. Mellon Delinking Encounters Project and the South African recipient of the British Academy Newton Advanced Fellowship for the project South African Jazz Cultures and the Archive. In these capacities he manages, funds and supervises a range of important research initiatives. In 2015 he was awarded the Fowler-Hamilton Visiting Research Fellowship at Christ Church, University of Oxford.

Marietjie Pauw undertook doctoral research under the supervision of Prof Stephanus Muller at Stellenbosch University. Her research recitals (2014) and her PhD dissertation (2015) explored ways of curating South African flute compositions. By interlacing museological curating approaches with contemporary arts curation, her research explored the facilitation of interfaces between art, artist, public and institutional contexts, thereby opening music curation to aspects of critical investigation and conversation. Marietjie is a post-doctoral researcher with Africa Open - Institute for Music, Research and Innovation.

The Graham Newcater Collection was donated to the University of Stellenbosch Documentation Centre for Music by the composer in 2008. This donation was the first collection acquired by the then newly established DOMUS.

Poster & Programme design by Strauss Louw

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