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# AN EVENING IN THE PALACE OF REASON WITH BACH AND FRITZ: LIBBY LARSEN AND THE ROYAL THEME

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## **An Evening in the Palace of Reason with Bach and Fritz: Libby Larsen and the Royal Theme**

### **Synopsis:**

This study explores Libby Larsen's creative compositional reintroduction of a centuries-old theme, the Royal Theme, in which she draws from the Musical Offering in her *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (2007). In the composition Larsen does more than simply display her composing ideas on the Royal Theme; many familiar musical characteristics and ideas that have in common certain elements of style from the musical past are also used. The work goes beyond the usual musical style of Larsen; it demonstrates the composer's individual and unique synthesis of conservative and contemporary musical language. The study shall also examine how Larsen copes with the stylistic changes of the three periods and how she reinterprets these different musical styles in the music.

## **An Evening in the Palace of Reason with Bach and Fritz:**

### **Libby Larsen and the Royal Theme**

This study explores Libby Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (2007). Her creativity takes inspiration from James R. Gaines's book, by the same title, and intends to depict and reveal the connection between Bach and Frederick at Potsdam through the use of the *Royal Theme*. What is interesting is that Larsen creatively places herself in the context, along with Bach and Frederick, by incorporating her musical language, including various contemporary compositional writings.

The paper examines how Larsen copes with the stylistic changes of the three periods and how she reinterprets these different musical styles in her music. One obvious handling in *Evening in the Palace of Reason*, hereafter referred to as "EPR," is that the music tends to move between polyphonic and melody-dominated homophonic textures in various small ways as material is developed in different sections of various movements. To some extent, Larsen's approach to musical handling is also similar to an operatic singing style. Prevailing Baroque musical characteristics and style such as Lombardic rhythms, imitative texture, and instrumental groupings are introduced in the composition, but in Larsen's unique style. All these aspects are addressed in this study.

Rather than detail Bach's or Frederick's composing manners, this study draws on the style favored by the two composers. Bach was faithful to the old style; his compositional writings reach back to his studies of Froberger, Frescobaldi, Palestrina, and other early masters. Bach was considered as "a conservative who consummated the developments of the past and did not embrace the new musical fashion" (Neumann, 1985:281). In contrast to Bach's contrapuntal musical writing, Frederick cultivated a *galant style*, a style that emphasizes melody and simple

texture.

Even though in “*EPR*” there is no employment of logical harmonic progression and phrase structure, that are significant in the classical period, Larsen approaches the classical style through the use of texture, dynamic levels and expressiveness in her music. In most cases, her work also contains many of the elements that can be associated with the *style galant*.

### **The Royal Theme**

In 1746 Frederick the Great, a passionate music-lover, a talented flutist and a great music patron, extended an invitation to J. S. Bach to visit the Prussian Court in Potsdam. The very next year, in spring, Bach, in his sixties, made the long trip from Leipzig to the Royal Palace. The event of Frederick meeting Bach at Potsdam has been discussed and described in journals and books. It has become an intriguing subject matter for music scholars, including composers, to explore related topics and possible ideas that draw from this event. It was also during this event that the Royal Theme came to be. After his return from Potsdam in 1747 Bach wrote the *Musical Offering* on this Royal Theme given to him by Frederick.



### The Royal Theme

In her *Evening in the Palace of Reason* Larsen creatively reintroduces this centuries-old Royal Theme, in which she draws from the *Musical Offering*. However, this is not the only composition that uses the Theme; Larsen also incorporated it in her *Bach 358* (2008). With an effort very different from Bach’s handling of the Royal Theme, Larsen reworks the theme in the “*EPR*” and presents it in a modern manner, establishing a new musical context for the Theme. New musical ideas that draw from the Theme are evident, providing unity in her work. Indeed, many authentic practices

of various periods have been adopted and modified in the composition. “*EPR*” not only offers a new perspective on the composer’s compositional writing, but also challenges audiences with a different listening experience.

### **Larsen and *Evening in the Palace of Reason***

*Evening in the Palace of Reason* was commissioned by Leonard, Street and Deinard in honor of Lowell Noteboom. It was premiered on February 22, 2008 by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, with Nicholas McGegan as conductor, at the Ordway Center for Performing Arts, Saint Paul, Minnesota. The title of this music composition is inspired by the title of a 2005 novel by James R. Gaines. The book is divided into chapters that carefully address the contrasts of Frederick the Great’s upbringing and the life of J. S. Bach. The climax falls on the event of face-to-face contact between the two. What is interesting is that Gaines places J. S. Bach and Frederick in the context of the great 18<sup>th</sup> century musical movements, showing their artistic preferences and achievements. It is this aspect that attracts Larsen to draw on the collision of musical styles of the two figures.

Although not exactly like the musical structure of *Musical Offering*—which contains 2 fugues, 11 canons and a trio sonata for flute, violin and basso continuo, and one perpetual canon—*Evening in the Palace of Reason* consists of five movements with titles: I) Ricercare Á 4; II) Canon; III) Ricercare: Divertimento; IV) Air on Two Themes of J. S. Bach; and V) Counterpoint with Riddle and Jig. The music is a *concerto grosso* in musical manner. It is presented in two small ensemble groups of string instruments: a string quartet operates as the concertino, which alternates with a “larger” instrumental ensemble (the “*repieno*” or *concerto grosso*) that consists of two violins, viola, cello and contrabass. Each instrumental grouping in the “*EPR*” is similar to Baroque sonatas (for church and chamber) in style. Larsen

captures the spirit of the Baroque period, particularly the instrumental groups found in Corelli's concerti.

Nevertheless, the treatment of the *concerto grosso* or "larger" group in Larsen's composition is presented in different musical manners. For example, it tends to show less contrast with the string quartet; it functions as an accompaniment, particularly in the first movement. In the second movement the two instrumental groups complement each other; each group presents a musical idea in turns. There are also moments where an echo-like effect is achieved.

Despite the traditional title given to each movement, the music moves between the musical styles of Baroque to Classical, while also touching on the musical disciplines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most obvious stylistic division between Baroque and Classical is indicated in the title of the third movement (*Ricercare: Divertimento*). *Ricercare* is often in imitative texture, while *Divertimento* refers to works that have light musical characters which are "for the entertainment of the listeners and the players, without excluding the possibility of high artistic achievement, such as is found in divertimentos by Haydn, Boccherini and Mozart.... [Divertimento] could serve as background music for some social gathering such as a *conversazione* or a banquet" (Unverricht and Eisen).

Fragments of the Royal Theme are presented in "EPR" at the opening of the music and throughout the composition, displaying various ways to exhibit the theme in fragmentation (Example 1)



The image displays a musical score for a fragment of the Royal Theme at measures 7. It is organized into two systems of staves. The first system includes Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello/Double Bass. The second system includes Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello/Double Bass, and Contrabass. The score is marked with a tempo of 'rit.' and 'poco a poco accel. (to m. 13)'. The first system shows a descending chromatic line in the Violin I part, with dynamics ranging from piano (p) to fortissimo (f). The second system shows a descending chromatic line in the Contrabass part, with dynamics ranging from fortissimo (ff) to pianissimo (pp).

### Ex. 2 Fragment of the Royal Theme at mm. 7

Generally, the descending chromatic contour is often presented in imitation. Indeed, Larsen offers various artistic strategies to introduce the Theme from Bach's *Musical Offering*, offering listeners the opportunity to hear it differently; one hears the prominent melodic thirds and descending chromatic lines instead of a single coherent melody.

Intervals, such as thirds and in particular ascending thirds, that derive from the head motif of the Royal Theme are also scattered throughout the entire composition. Often, a leap of third is used in the first two notes of a musical idea or melodic line. There are also times when a series of thirds in either ascending or descending forms is introduced at the opening of the movement or important passages, and a clear example can be seen right at the opening of the second (cello and double bass) (Example 3).

## II. CANON

9

♩ = 63, ♩ = 126  
(constant ♩ throughout)

I  
Vln. I

II  
Vln. II

Vla.  
Viola

Vnc.  
Violoncello

Cb.  
Contrabass

*fpp*, *mf*, *ff*, *p*, *f*, *stacc.*

Ex. 3 Fragment of the Royal Theme at Movement II

Indeed, Larsen's proficiency to make the Theme significant is evident; there is always something that can be related to the Theme. Through various musical ideas, such as intervals and the head and tail of the Theme, Larsen has provided in "EPR" underlying connections of the Theme, giving coherence to the music.

In addition, Larsen often applies different rhythmic patterns and values to the fragments of the Royal Theme to provide variety, though with recognizable basic musical contour of the Theme. At times, she employs accents to stress the melodic line, catching the attention of the listeners.

Generally, Larsen makes use of different imitative techniques in "EPR". At times, she inserts passages that are reminiscent of a four-part imitation of a capella style to capture the traditional vocal music of past eras. In addition, although the second movement is called a "canon", Larsen employs no strict imitation; rather, imitative textures and techniques including point of imitation are evident throughout

the movement (Example 4). Thus, Larsen adapts the musical term freely.

Example 4. Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (Mvt. II: mm. 65-67)

Lombardic rhythms, or Scotch snap, is also introduced in the music, giving it a Baroque flavor. This unequaled short-long rhythmic pattern that involves a dotted figure was often used during the Baroque and Classical periods. This recognizable rhythmic pattern is also used in the second movement of Larsen's composition to imitate baroque idioms. Larsen is not only attracted to the conventional musical idioms, but also carefully incorporates them in her music. The manner in which this Lombardic rhythmic pattern is presented here varies by using different note-values such as a sixteenth-note followed by a dotted eighth-note, and a thirty-second note followed by a dotted sixteenth-note. She often employs accents on the short-note values to draw the listeners' attention to these rhythmic patterns of the past eras.

As the title ("Ricercare: Divertimento") of the third movement indicates, there is an obvious emphatic move from Baroque to the Classical musical idioms. Larsen utilizes sudden dynamic contrasts and a gradual increase in dynamic levels that can

be related to the Mannheim orchestra, which were renowned for the sound of the full orchestra doing a crescendo together and sharp dynamic contrast. An example is at the conclusion of the third movement, in which the music not only shows a sudden dynamic contrast, but also a final statement of repeating notes where the dynamic markings gradually escalate from *piano* to *fortissimo* (Example 5).

The image displays a musical score for Example 5, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system includes Violins I and II, Viola, and Violoncello. The second system includes Violins I and II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is in 2/4 time and features a dynamic contrast from *f* to *p*. The final statement of repeating notes shows a dynamic escalation from *p* to *ff*. The score is marked with *unic.* and *div.* above the first violin staff.

Example 5. Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (Mvt. III: mm. 123-127)

The use of dynamic contrast is also scattered throughout the third movement. One such example is the rapid contrasts of forte and piano dynamics in the staccato chordal-like passage (Example 6).

\* Harmonics written where sounding.

Example 6. Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (Mvt. III: mm. 78-82)

Larsen also employs musical elements of *style galant*, such as incessant short trills and grace notes in the second movement. In addition, expressive themes are often presented homophonically in the fourth movement, creating a theme-and-accompaniment texture. Melody-dominated homophonic texture is generally a musical characteristic of the classical period. This is yet another example of how Larsen creatively relates her compositional writings to musical characteristics of the historical past.

Themes with memorable melodic profiles that are reminiscent of an aria are one of the fascinating developments in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Richard L. Crocker argues that one of the aims of music for this period was to flatter the ears of listeners.<sup>1</sup> In Frederick's music one often witnesses the influence of operatic aria

<sup>1</sup> “One of the most fascinating developments of the new style [in the 18<sup>th</sup> century] was the treatment of themes. Themes with memorable melodic profiles had been essential to the full-blown aria of the early 1700s.... Similar themes could also be found in the tuttis of concertos...” (Crocker, 1986: 358).

singing, and examples can be seen in his *Recitativo* (1<sup>st</sup> movement) from Flute Sonata no. 84 in C minor and in Flute Sonata no. 126 in A minor.

To capture the prevailing vocal operatic singing style in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Larsen often presents themes in simple homophonic texture, although she adds no ornamentation. On some occasions, she employs repeating pitches in the accompaniment to support the themes. The result bears much resemblance to the compositional writing that is commonly found in the music of classical composers such as Haydn, Mozart and Frederick. Although Frederick wrote music in fugal style, such as in his *Alla breve* (3<sup>rd</sup> movement) for Flute Sonata no. 84 in C minor, he generally and passionately desired a musical language characterized by the simple, logical new *style galant*. In other words, Frederick's music is simple, with clear phrasing, straightforward structures and instrumental interactions that are pleasant to play and hear.

Larsen often references characteristic sounds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in her works; one example is her use of a series of natural harmonics a consecutive fifth apart in the accompaniment of the "larger" instrumental group in the fourth movement of the "EPR." These string "tuning" sounds are reminiscent of the strings of the violin in the opening of Berg's Violin Concerto. Similarly, in this movement, Larsen introduces passages of natural harmonics in the accompaniment to generate a contemporary sound-palette and a lively musical character. What one encounters in this composition is various musical fashions from different musical pasts coming into one.

Apart from using the constant changing meters throughout the "EPR", Larsen also introduces repeating groups of pitches within a time frame at measures 42-43 in the first movement. Such musical handling can also be seen in the works of many

modernist composers, such as John Cage's *Music for More* (1984-87) and Sofia Gubaidulina's *String Quartet No. 3* (1987). Larsen shows greater freedom in musical presentation in the fourth movement, such as at the opening, where the music moves alternatively between non-meter and meter indicated (Example 7).

The image displays a musical score for the first four measures of the fourth movement of Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason*. The score is arranged in two systems, each for a string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello) and a Contrabass. The tempo is marked as 'c. 72' with the instruction 'with great freedom and elasticity'. The time signature is '9+2'. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with various dynamic markings (mp, p, f, pp) and performance instructions like 'lightly', 'niente', 'espr.', and 'sul A'. The second system continues the piece with similar markings and instructions.

Example 7. Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (Mvt. IV: mm. 1-4)

Larsen concludes “*EPR*” with musical languages that derive from both the classical period and her own musical idioms. Not only does Larsen stress the off-beats with Bartók snaps, accents and dynamic markings, but also inserts a quasi-*bodhrán* sound in the movement beginning at measure 139, providing the work with a unique percussion timbre. Without using a *bodhrán*<sup>2</sup> Larsen captures and imitates the sound by using strings.

Indeed, the music shows Larsen's imaginative power; for a moment, one is introduced to the sound of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, this musical presentation

<sup>2</sup> This is a single-reed frame drum of Ireland and has gained popularity in the Celtic music world, especially in Scotland and Cape Breton. It has become increasingly popular in the performance of Irish traditional music and most traditional groups since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

does not persist until the end of the composition; rather, a sudden shift of texture and sound color appears at measure 217 (Example 8), bringing the audience back to the music of the classical period.

In example 8, Larsen introduces a pattern that consists of a series of alternating thirds. This accompaniment pattern is reminiscent of the *galant* musical styles of Alberti bass, which are commonly found in the music of Mozart. Although it is a style of keyboard writing in a series of broken octaves, Larsen employs it in viola in broken thirds.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for measures 215-222. The first system includes staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The second system includes staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. A tempo change to 'Q' (Quadrante) is marked at measure 217. The Viola part in the second system shows a pattern of alternating thirds, characteristic of the Alberti bass style.

Example 8. Larsen's *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (Mvt. V: mm. 215-222)

## Conclusion

*Evening in the Palace of Reason* displays Larsen's strong interest in the musical styles of the past. The musical handling in the work shows her careful study not only of the musical styles of Bach's time, but also the musical idioms of the classical period. One can perceive from listening to her music that she enjoys the creative challenge of different musical styles. Larsen has not only created fascinating sound textures that draw from different periods, but also has convincingly integrated them

into the music. Her music certainly speaks with confidence to the musical characters of the past.

*Evening in the Palace of Reason* certainly shows Larsen's musical individuality and great musical imagination, providing a new view to Larsen's musical writings. In general, Larsen's work demonstrates a traditional style of music with a corresponding movement towards the expression of new aspects of musical language.

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