



## David Lang and Eighth Blackbird — composition as explanation

### CD Review by Colin Clarke

My main previous experience of David Lang was not positive: Lang's contemporary retake on Beethoven's *Fidelio*, entitled *prisoner of the state*, when performed at London's Barbican Hall by the BBC Symphony and Ilan Volkov. The work is an act of bravery that split the critics. As to *Fanfare*, I enjoyed Lang's *these broken wings* (like the present disc, also with Eighth Blackbird on Çedille; see *Fanfare* 44:2). But in the Eighth Blackbird ("8BB") commission *composition as explanation* (2020), scored for flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, and cello, Lang seems even more confident. He has a voice that, while varied, is consistent. His piece also requires excellence in performance, which it certainly receives from 8BB. Noted for its excellence, this ensemble has all the qualities to enable Lang's piece to fly: ultra-focused rhythm, ferocious curiosity, and a real resonance with fresh contemporary repertoire.

The basis of Lang's work is Gertude Stein's lecture "Composition as Explanation." In (visual) live performance, it clearly has a dramatic element, as the world premiere had a director: The premiere performance, at Duke Arts, North Carolina, on February 25, 2022, was directed by Anne Bogart. In an explicatory blog post, Bogart says she claimed Gertrude Stein as her mother, and Bertold Brecht as her father. The match between Stein and Lang is a good one: Both break down materials into smaller blocks that can (and do) bear repetition. As Bogart puts it, Stein "broke literature down, like Cubist painting that reveals each side differently." She also makes a telling parallel between Stein and composition in referring to the "incantatory musicality of Stein's repetitions and syntax."

The specific lecture that comprises the source code of Lang's musical program was written in 1925–26. Delivered at both Cambridge and Oxford universities, the text muses on her own early work and her approach to writing, and was designed itself in a nonlinear format. Ideas such as repetition as semantic desensitization (stripping a word of its accrued meanings and then subsequently "revving" that word) are vital to Stein's process. Unsurprisingly, Stein's way with time is skewed also: Instead of past, present, and future, she has "prolonged present" and "continuous present."

Lang translates all this into music in fascinating fashion. As words are reintroduced into different environments (and their "feel" changes accordingly), so the same happens with Lang's musical building blocks. The musicians of Eighth Blackbird not only have to play; they also have to deliver Stein's text in manners along a spectrum from plainly spoken to *Sprechgesang*. In her staging, Bogart said she imagined that "each musician is a lecturer as well as a Cubist avatar for Gertude Stein."

One of Stein's core traits is concision, a verbal concentration that seems to impact Lang's mode of composition. As in the Stein, nothing is superfluous, and this works maximally to the music's advantage. Lang himself has referred to his work as "super chamber music," a piece for a small number of performers who have to perform tasks beyond their norm. Eighth Blackbird's members sound like they have been performing this piece for their entire lives. Everything is so slick; there is not a hint of a fumbled word throughout. Enthusiasm is maximal, and the frisson of live performance here really translates onto disc. The key is their understanding of how Lang mirrors Stein across disciplines, literary to musical.

The musical surface is nicely varied, too, starting from a recitation ("There is singularly nothing that makes a difference") in conjunction with frenzied rhythmic tapping (here imitating the act of writing) but also including also a sort of ritualistic delivery against a teasing high piano single note ("Those who are creating the modern composition"). Using two voices in spoken but musical ways (overlapping, imitation) later on adds an extra layer, both sonically and in terms of interpretative depth; this seems to invite in a softening as the instrumental component seems not only to soften, but softly to sparkle. Left to their own glimmerings, the instrumentalists seem to act as a prolongation of the essence of Stein's discourse. And yet the very next section brings composed chaos ("beginning again and again is a natural thing"). Tapping now imitates a typewriter in "It is understood by this time," while the juxtaposition of unaccompanied spoken word and instrumental (and their eventual conjoining) informs "and now to begin as if to begin" (a meditation on that "continuous present" and its relationship to the act of composition).

The huge contrast between the group's virtuosity (and particularly that of the flutist Dalie Chin) at the end of the sixth movement and the delicacy of the seventh ("And after that that changes") is highly effective, throwing the sense of fragile melancholy of the text into high relief. This seventh movement is like a slow dance, or perhaps a slowly rotating kaleidoscope, with the vocal line almost tending toward musical theater. A special word is due for the consistency and sensitivity of violinist Maiani da Silva's contributions to the ninth movement ("The problem from this time"). Underpinned by slowly rotating winds and slowly arpeggiating piano, this is a true plateau of peace, delivered almost as if in a dream. Lang tends towards a more jazz-like feeling in "This then the contemporary composition," which eventually moves into decidedly grungy territory (albeit garlanded by silvery curlicues). There is a lightness, and even humor, at times, too.

This is a highly valuable premiere recording. The recording quality itself is beyond criticism, as so often from this label. Colin Clarke