



## 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

## CD Review by Huntley Dent

Such was Gertrude Stein's fame in 1926 that when she wrote a lecture about her aims as a writer, it was delivered at both Cambridge and Oxford (organized by Edith Sitwell) and published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press. The lecture title was "Composition as Explanation," and it has now been resurrected and turned into a multimedia performance piece by Pulitzer Prize winner David Lang (b. 1957), who was known to me only as one of the founders of the iconic avant-garde ensemble Bang on a Can. That group joined a New Music elite at the level of the Kronos Quartet, JACK Quartet, and Eighth Blackbird, which performs here. The performance is stellar, and Lang's score is ingenious and immediately accessible—he notes that it is in the key of C.

This thumbnail sketch only hints at the labyrinth of issues involved in *composition as explanation*, which are interesting to consider before commenting on the music. First off is a novel means of performance: As a longtime collaborator with Eighth Blackbird, Lang wanted to stretch the ensemble's abilities. Each of the six musicians underwent intensive training in speaking, singing, and acting in order to arrive at what Lang calls in his composer's note a "proper performance." Almost the whole of Stein's lecture is folded into a theatrical setting that finds the musicians reciting and singing the text.

Lang explicitly wanted *composition as explanation* to be taken out of the concert hall into a theater space, and it's a shame that so many layers of performance, other than the booklet photos and a two-minute video on Çedille's website, have been reduced to an audio CD. I can't speak about the acting lessons and stage movements, which required members of Eighth Blackbird to recite and sing Stein's lines while simultaneously playing their instruments, but in this studio rendering the vocals are more than acceptable. In particular, the recitation doesn't sound amateurish, which would have been disqualifying in a piece lasting an hour and filled with the spoken word.

The next issue is how worthwhile Stein's essay is for the general listener. Stein didn't achieve wide recognition as a writer until she wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933; she was 59. She was already celebrated as a cultural force through her Paris salon, which attracted the giants of modernism from Picasso and Matisse to Stein's fellow American expatriates Fitzgerald and Hemingway. The flavor of her circular, repetitive prose, as well as its musicality, is enshrined in Virgil Thomson's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Although she used the plainest everyday speech, Stein has earned herself a place in the permanent avant-garde by remaining ambiguously controversial.

To her devotees, she is a major innovator in English prose, to her detractors a practitioner of a kind of jabberwocky that waves its hands at meaning while deliberately defying understanding. Even though "Composition as Explanation" was delivered in the form of a lecture, it contains practically zero information, preferring prose poetry and Stein's love of her own style.

The lecture, and Lang's piece, begins, "There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking."

Nothing becomes clearer in the next 58 minutes. Lang finds various ways to make the words come across. He uses Minimalist repetition, which is quite suitable for Stein's prose, with its ethos of "beginning again and again."

There is overlapping narration and singing, along with evocations of the writing process itself—Lang calls upon three "surfaces" that sound like a pen scribbling across the page, rapping on a typewriter case, and typing itself. He also calls for the entire performance to be amplified and suggests employing a sound designer.

As a long-ago reader of Stein, I don't consider her either profound or nonsensical; she is undoubtedly an American original on the order of Charles Ives or Edward Hopper. In this lecture she is demonstrating the aesthetic that she is purporting to explain. Here's a sample: "Composition is not there, it is going to be there and we are here. This is some time ago for us naturally. There is something to be added afterwards." Tweaking out the meaning, she is telling us that the now is the only location where composition takes place. Therefore, the artist needs to create the feeling of being here now and hold us in its spell.

This is Stein's central notion of "the continuous present." What remains intriguing is whether her eccentric poetic language transports us to such an abstract, all but mystical, location. Moreover, she doesn't limit composition to artists but applies it to everyone's life. We are all composing our lives in instances of time that are "here," only to immediately flee to "there." By implication tradition is dead, populated by monuments rather than living expression. If you want to immerse yourself in this lecture-as-performance, it contains a bewildering surfeit of quasi-exposition biting its own tail. Only some listeners will find this enjoyable.

I'm impressed that Lang devised such an entertaining vehicle to enliven the text. A surprising, unpredictable stream of music parallels Stein's stream of consciousness, and even if you are alienated or baffled by the words, *composition as explanation* is often as jaunty as Walton's *Façade*. A large percussion battery, including drums, vibraphone, and marimba, adds color to Eighth Blackbird's complement of violin, piano, and woodwinds. Key ideas in the lecture are denoted by the piece's 10 sections: "there is singularly nothing," "those who are creating," "of course it is beautiful," etc. Lang's idiom isn't close to Thomason's use of hymn tunes and folk influences; the general mode is Minimalist and declamatory. Eighth Blackbird enunciates the text quite clearly; everything can be followed by ear. (The complete text is included in small type, but it is also available online through poetry websites.)

As for any downside, I can't say that my attention was held by Stein's lecture, and Lang's attempt to couch it in accessible music doesn't in the end make it intelligible. The result is like Homespun Americana-as-Dada. *Composition as explanation* was written for Eighth Blackbird in 2016 for the centennial of the venerable Chicago Arts Club, where Stein herself gave a reading in 1934.

I doubt that any ensemble other than Eighth Blackbird will be willing to undergo the specialized training demanded for a performance, so it is likely that the work, following Stein's dictum, has passed from "here" to "there," with this CD as a memento. Huntley Dent