

Trio sopra "et sola Facta" (1998)

Betsy Jolas

"This little trio, commissioned by Michigan State University for the Verdehr Trio, was completed in Paris in May, 1998. It is based on the only two notes my grandson could play at the time on his brand new flute, G and F. These appear throughout the piece in various transformations as a kind of primitive *cantus firmus*.

This specific aspect is reflected in my intentionally enigmatic title, which points back to the old tradition of musical riddles. Thus, hidden in the Latin phrase '*et sola facta*' ('and she became one') can be found the key syllables, sol fa, which designate in French the central notes G and F.

The complete title of this work: *sopra et sola facta*, with its curious mixture of Italian and Latin (as for example in Monteverdi's *Sonata sopra Sancta Maria ora pro nobis*), is another instance of such distant historical references."

—Betsy Jolas

The world premiere of *Trio sopra "et sola Facta"* was on March 28, 1999 in the Music Room, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Betsy Jolas (born 1926, Paris, France) was born to parents of American and Lorraine origin. Her mother, the translator Maria Jolas, had studied singing and continued to sing all her life. Her father, the poet and journalist Eugène Jolas, was the founder and editor of the review *Transition* which featured over a period of ten years the greatest names in literature, painting, and music of the interwar period (in particular James Joyce, whose *Finnegan's Wake* was published in this review in serial form under the title *Work in Progress*).

The family settled in the United States in 1940, and Jolas finished her schooling at the Lycée Français in New York before she started to study at Bennington College in 1945, where she was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts the following year. At the same time, she sang in the Dessoff choirs which she also accompanied as organist and as pianist, thus discovering the polyphonic repertory of the Renaissance which was to have a profound influence on her. She returned to Paris in 1946, to continue her studies with Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique of Paris. Having completed her studies, she worked for the French radio ORTF until 1971 before she took over from Olivier Messiaen at the Conservatoire de Paris, where she was appointed Professor of Analysis in 1975 and Professor of Composition in 1978. She also taught in the United States, notably at the universities of Yale, Harvard, Berkeley, Los Angeles, San Diego, as well as Mills College where she held the Darius Milhaud chair.

Betsy Jolas won the International Orchestra Conducting Competition in Besançon in 1953, and she was awarded many prizes both in France and abroad including those from the Coply Foundation of Chicago, the ORTF, the American Academy of Arts, the Koussevitsky Foundation, the National Music Grand Prix, the Grand Prix of the City of Paris and of the SACEM, and the Maurice Ravel International Prize. Jolas became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1983, and was made Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters in 1985. She was named "Personality of the Year" for France in 1992, and in 1995, was chosen to be a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1997, she was named Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur.

The entire opus of Betsy Jolas centers on the voice, whether it be present or merely suggested by the instruments. Of course, the most important element is the singing voice, but more particularly the strange voice of the *Sprechmelodie* invented by Schoenberg in his *Pierrot Lunaire*. However, whereas Schoenberg came up against the difficulty of having the spoken voice utter specific pitches, Jolas solved the problem by having the instruments themselves "speak."

Additional information is available at www.betsyjolas.com.