Revenants

32 Variations for Piano in or around C Minor

1994, 2019

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This piece was first composed in 1994 in association with a talk that developed into the final chapter of my book *Musical Meaning* (2001). The chapter involved a critique of the rule of musical originality that dominated the second half of the twentieth century and still lingers on as a received idea: the rule that truly serious art music is defined by its capacity to break with the past. Among the many things wrong with this view its failure to recognize how pervasive is the experience of things that return, that haunt, that revisit, that come again, all of which is summed up in my title: *Revenants*. Being haunted is not exceptional; it's normal.

The chapter included a recording of the original version of the music, which sought to do expressively what the chapter did conceptually. Looking back after twenty-five years, I thought that the goal was still fine, but that the music, the only piece I wrote during a long hiatus in my composing career, was in serious need of revision. The opportunity to revise it--rewrite it, really--arose in connection with a new print edition of the book scheduled for publication by the University of California Press in 2021. I owe the idea of making this new version to Raina Polivka, my editor at the press.

*Revenants* is in some sense "about" haunting or enlivening returns, which form a feature of its thirty-two variations. But as that number implies, the piece is also meant to be a revenant, a condition also implied by its full subtitle. Behind the music looms Beethoven's 32 *Variations in C Minor*, which my set resembles in size, continuity, and tonality (though my C Minor is not Beethoven's). Behind both Beethoven's piece and mine looms the much more imposing thirty-two of Bach's *Goldberg* set, which also becomes a revenant here.

There is, I think, nothing nostalgic in my entry in this series, but only an impulse to acknowledge that "originality," properly speaking, is just the name we apply to those revenants that haunt us most effectively.

Duration: 16 minutes.
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Let fade.