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### By Ronald Caltabiano

If two out of every five new pieces produced by Bay Area composers were clearly excellent, we would be the new-music capital of the world. Judging by last Monday's Earplay concert at the Yerba Buena Center, we may be going in that direction. All five compositions presented were well made, but two had the clarity and expressiveness that make them exceptional.

Earplay's mission to present Bay Area composers was in full force. Three of the five composers had done a major portion of their studies locally: Israeli composer Eitan Steinberg, Oregonian Walter Winslow, and Illinois composer Ellen Ruth Harrison all studied at UC Berkeley. Argentine composer Adriana Verdié de Vas Romero studied at CSU Long Beach. Daniel S. Godfrey, who trained at Yale and the University of Iowa, was the only composer lacking an academic affiliation with California.

The concert opened with Eitan Steinberg's fleeting but marvelously crafted *Talk, Talk, Talk* (1997), which could

be described as a fanfare for string trio. Although only four minutes in duration, it packs a wallop. The composition begins with a slow, dark, forte dialog between the viola and the cello. From there, the composer skillfully builds momentum. The dialog expands to include the violin, and soon the counterpoint becomes engagingly complex. Rhythmic divisions gradually increase as quick repeated figures are passed among the instruments. As the tessitura opens into the upper register, the brighter sounds are highlighted by sul ponticello coloration before the work drives toward its gripping close.

### **A Rough Arch Form**

The other highlight of the evening was Ellen Ruth Harrison's *Masques et Visages* (1999), which opened the second half of the concert. This 15-minute, two-movement piece was also scored for string trio, now with the addition of an oboe. The first movement has a rough arch form, opening and closing with somber oboe solos that are occasionally answered by the cello. The four instruments have a more equal role in the center section, uniting there to form a series of gentle sighing gestures.

The form of the second movement is more complex but no less clear. Crisp staccato string chords begin the movement. The oboe soon joins them, then proceeds to dominate with stern, dramatic gestures. A fresh section starts with a mournful oboe solo accompanied by pizzicato-string chords that recall the opening of the movement. Near the end of the work, oboe announcements are commented on by the strings until the four instruments join in slow, sonorous counterpoint.

The cryptic title of Adriana Verdié de Vas Romero's solo piece, *Flute 3.2.4* (1994), refers to the primary intervals — thirds, seconds, and fourths — used in each of the three movements. Although the composer indicates there should be no pause between the movements, flutist Tod Brody did take short breaks, which did not seem to harm the work.

### **Subtle Extended Techniques**

## **CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW**

### **Two New Works Lead The Way**

**February 6, 2001**

The first movement demonstrates two-part counterpoint for a solo instrument with assuredness, even if somewhat predictably. A low ostinato is stated at the opening and then is suggested throughout under a lyrical upper line. The second movement uses subtle extended techniques, like key slaps, tone bending, and timbre changes through alternative fingerings. Unfortunately, there is very little meaningful material to connect the techniques. The fast-paced last movement is showy, but again left me wondering where the meaning was. Tod Brody's fine performance made the most of this limited work.

Walter Winslow's *Trio Rustico* (1989) for flute, clarinet and cello has a successful attention-grabbing opening. But the clear start soon disintegrates into less interesting counterpoint. The low-profile gestures of the second movement also do nothing to fulfill the promise of the work's opening.

Daniel Godfrey's *Numina* (1991) is a colorful sextet for three woodwinds and three strings. Although there are flashes of originality throughout, even the most inspired ideas and beautiful lines go down predictable pathways. The same material might have made a more successful work had the material been given a more succinct treatment.

This was a well-constructed concert by the talented Earplay ensemble, the works fitting together nicely, similar in instrumentation, yet differentiated enough to keep my attention throughout the program. Ultimately, it was the gripping memories of the successful Steinberg and Harrison works that made the evening so satisfying.

(Ronald Caltabiano is a composer living in San Francisco and teaching at San Francisco State University.)

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