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## The Modern in Wayne Peterson

BY JEFF DUNN

0 COMMENTS

"It is only the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned."

— Oscar Wilde

In a radio interview almost 30 years ago, the Bay Area composer Wayne Peterson spoke about a new piece of his for violin and piano, remarking that "problems of line, of melody, and the relationship of the piano counterpoint and so forth are concepts that are rather old-fashioned, I'm afraid."

How things have changed in music since 1978. Peterson, a distinguished professor of music at San Francisco State University for over 40 years, celebrated his 80th birthday on Sept. 3. In honor of the occasion, the College of Creative Arts and Earplay presented an all-Peterson concert last Thursday.

As I entered the university's rather shopworn Knuth Hall, I thought back on the era of my musical upbringing and the saws of complaint about the now-older "new music" — that it was unplayable, was "difficult," "could not be understood at one hearing," was "all brain and no heart," and so on. Before my ears was to be played the music of a relatively unsung master composer of the modernist era, a man who counted himself among the avant garde in 1978, and an academic to boot. Was I in store for what Henry Pleasants notoriously referred to as "the agony of modern music"?

Fortunately, for the most part, I heard again the qualities that make the best, formerly "modern" music, still worth hearing: craft, balance, sonority, clarity, inventiveness, variety. Standouts were the premiere of a song for soprano and percussion, titled *Freedom and Love*; the first movement of *A Three Piece Suite* (2003); and *Colloquy* (1999).

Peterson handled the combination of voice and percussion for *Freedom and Love* expertly, giving Ann Moss center stage to sing the six verses, and allowing Jim Kassis to tickle and whap away on a series of instruments to introduce each. Deeply memorable were the several buildups to the "boing" of a Chinese opera gong between verses. While it may seem inappropriate for percussion to discourse on love, it was fitting for lines like "Love's wing moults when caged and captured / Only free, he soars enraptured."

Unapologetic Use of Melody

Peterson described the *Suite's* first movement, "Out of the Blue," as "a joyful reminiscence of my youthful experience as a bebop pianist." Here, that "old-fashioned" item he apologized for once — melody — came out in inventive spurts, along with jazzy rhythmic gestures. Conducted by Mary Chun, the ensemble, consisting of flute, clarinet, cello, piano, and percussion, performed flawlessly.



Mary Chun

*Colloquy* is for virtuoso harp and flute and displays many extended techniques for the harp, most of which are extremely effective and build to a strong climax with sustained energy — hard to do for an instrument that in conventional deployment is so dreamy and laid-back. The only technique I had difficulty with was the excess rapping demanded on Karen Gottlieb's harp, a cliché that illustrates Wilde's quote.

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Among the remaining works, all of which were expertly crafted, if less arresting, *Antiphonies* (1999) was the most pleasurable to the ear, featuring delicious dischords on Daniel Kennedy's solo marimba and vibraphone. *Peregrinations* was a fine étude, technically speaking, for Peter Josheff's clarinet, and the 1993 *Duo* for violin and piano showed off Karen Rosenak's matchlessly clear articulation between notes on the keyboard. But the *Duo*, *Peregrinations*, and the last two movements of *A Three Piece Suite* bring up a sad challenge facing the moderns: If the work is to be "difficult" and challenging to the listener, but ultimately rewarding, why does he or she get to listen to it only once?

Scores should be distributed to music-reading audience members, or the pieces should be played two or three times to prove the supposed worthiness after multiple hearings. Otherwise, listener doubts may arise. I certainly had to strain to hear *any* of the "full-blown lyricism of the Adagio" that Peterson ascribed to his *Duo*. Frankly, since no break was taken between movements, and none was particularly slow, I couldn't even tell for sure when I was *in* the Adagio.

Because the best of Peterson's works contain some old-fashioned verities, I expect some of it will last, even if the new-fashioned manifestations of world music, pastiche, rock and pop infusions, and postminimalism are absent from his music. For that I doff my hat, and wish him congratulations and a grand time trying to catch up with Elliot Carter over the next 20 years.

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