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Nothing Doing

BY MICHAEL MCDONAGH



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0 COMMENTS

The business of art is to communicate. If it doesn't, what's the point? And though modernist music has sometimes adopted a "high art" indifference to its audiences, as with Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances, which forbade vocal expressions either pro or con and critics as well, it has paid a high price. Most people like music that connects with them on a deeply personal level. Audiences may have resisted pieces by Bartók, like *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–19), and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* when they were new, but many of these resisted, even reviled works now speak to audiences worldwide.

I'd like to say that Earplay's first concert of its 2007–2008 season, which took place at Herbst Theatre last Monday, had works of that intensity or caliber, but this sadly was not the case. Few of the six pieces, all by living composers, four of whom were present, had moments of seductive or emotive force that make great music. Instead, they mostly used modernist clichés. Bartók, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg were compelled to write the way they did, but most of the composers here — academics all — seemed to be just going through the motions. And that's a shame when you consider that Earplay, now in its 23rd year, has programmed pieces by heavy hitters like Witold Lutoslawski and Ralph Shapey. The biggest heavy hitters here were local light Wayne Peterson, and Peter Maxwell Davies, who has been considered a major player for years.

Davies' six-minute *Economies of Scale* (2002), for violin, clarinet, cello, and piano, encapsulated what was wrong with the concert. Although described by the composer in his program notes as a piece written to honor the Nobel-winning economist James Mirrlees, it didn't sound the least bit celebratory. Instead it came off as a dour exercise in postwar modernist techniques, which is sad, because Davies has written thrilling pieces like the famous *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969). Peterson's *Duo* (1993) for violin and piano, sounded difficult yet hardly captivating, and you shouldn't have to read a composer's program notes to hear what he did with bebop standards by Bill Evans and Errol Garner.

Listless Heart

Liza Lim's *Heart's Ear* (1997), for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, and cello, was just as uneventful, and I wondered why a brief and quite beautiful unison passage was dropped. Could it be this heart had changed its mind, and decided to remain incommunicado?

Laurie San Martin's *Dances* (2004, 2007) for solo piano (Karen Rosenak), however, was a fairly interesting attempt at exploiting the keyboard's mid–lower range with tangos and other dance forms. One brief section sounded like a deconstructed rag. Barbara White's *mind's fear / heart's delight* (1998), for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and percussion, sounded logical, colorful (helped by the percussion), and rhythmically varied, especially when it dropped into a kind of minimalist groove. (There's a reason why they're popular and imitated.)

But the most accomplished piece on the program was Mark Applebaum's solo piece for flute (Tod Brody), *Entre Funerailles IV* (2000), which never took itself too seriously. It was light, clear, and full of subtly contrasted colors, and it sometimes evoked Takemitsu's use of the *shakuhachi* in his scores, like that for Kurosawa's film *Ran*.

Earplay's performances, under Mary Chun's firm, yet flexible beat, sounded uniformly excellent. But the program, which someone decided to call "Facets and Lines," reminded me of a line in a novel that my friend Mac was so fond of quoting, "Nothing kept happening." I hope that future Earplay concerts will be more eventful, and maybe — insh'allah — a wee bit passionate.

Michael McDonagh is a San Francisco–based poet and arts writer whose work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The San Francisco Review of Books*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *The Bay Area Reporter*.



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