

February 12, 2008

## Grand Tour of the Unorthodox

BY HEUWELL TIRCUIT

0 COMMENTS

An encouragingly large and enthusiastic audience turned out Monday evening in Herbst Theatre for a serious, handsomely chosen program of new chamber music presented by the expanded Earplay ensemble. Mary Chun conducted most of the program's "Unorthodox Journey" evening, whose featured soloists were soprano Ji Young Yang, violist Ellen Ruth Rose, and clarinetist Peter Josheff.

Aaron Einbond's *Beside Oneself* for viola and electronics (2007) opened the concert, followed by Peter Maxwell Davies' *Hymnos* for clarinet and piano (1967), and the premiere of Martha Callison Horst's *Creature Songs* for soprano and string trio. After intermission, we heard Claude Vivier's *Paramirabo* for flute, violin, and cello; Morton Feldman's *i met heine on the rue fürstenberg* for soprano and mixed sextet (1973); plus Richard Festinger's *Diary of a Journey* (2003) for various mixed-sextet combinations.

An outstanding series of artists included flutist Tod Brody, clarinetist Josheff, violinists Terrie Baune and Lisa Weiss, violists Rose and Emily Onderdonk, cellists Thalia Moore and Dan Reiter, pianists Michael Seth Orland and Eris Zivian, and percussionists Daniel Kennedy and Kevin Neuhoff.

While quality levels remained high throughout, I found Feldman's *i met heine* abstraction especially pleasurable in its utter calm. Of course, his music is ever that way. It never shouts or reaches overly dramatic gestures. That included the vocal lines, which are sung quietly without words. The most unusual aspect of the piece is its lack of pointillism, a thing so typical of Feldman's music.

It just sits there, sort of purring like a contented cat. The composer often complained that performances were rarely soft or slow enough for him. While the playing Monday was accurate to a flaw, it struck me as less than that for Feldman. Instead of the 11 minutes, 13 would have been better, and so would softer dynamics. It needed less *piano* and more *pianissimo* — more soft-spoken playing.

Gone Too Soon

Canadian composer Vivier (1949–83) is a well-kept secret for most audiences. His music has been praised to the sky by eminent musicians, including György Ligeti. Although strangled in his Paris apartment at age 34 — he was there on a Canadian Council Grant to complete his opera on the life of Tchaikovsky — Vivier left a large body of music. That grant had been fostered by the success of his 1979 chamber opera *Copernicus (Ritual de mort)*, following its Montreal premiere in 1980.

Although Vivier began his career as a composer of electronic and tape music, his 1976 visit to Bali turned his style at a right angle. Suddenly, he was writing tender, floating music somewhere between the styles of Messiaen and Takemitsu.

*Paramirabo* is essentially a nature piece of pastoral elegance. Mostly soft textured, with the occasional loud piano figuration outburst, it features many birdcall effects, as well as such oddities as having the flutist hum parts of his melodic segments. Those, too, suggested birdsong. The violin and cello also produce aviary suggestions, played in high harmonics. I only wished they'd played this fine piece twice, as it needed more exposure.

Horst's *Creature Songs* was commissioned by Earplay and completed only last summer at the MacDowell Colony. She set three poems: Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider"; a Druid incantation, "Song of Amergin"; and Siegfried Sassoon's "Everyone's Voice." Horst achieved a nearly Wagnerian ecstasy with these settings, using only modest forces. Remarkable!

All three songs formed a lovely hymn and quasi-love-poem to nature. Soprano Yang, from the San Francisco Opera's Merola program, was especially outstanding in her not-so-easy role, often soaring into very high registers.

Festinger's *Diary of a Journey* uses a basic arch form: a quiet, slow prelude before a more dramatic section before returning to the mood of the opening. It's a solidly crafted piece in what I take to be soft-core serial style. There was a certain epic quality to this work, in which sheer craftsmanship reached

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exceptional levels.

Festinger made no attempt to reinvent the wheel. He didn't seek avant-gardisms merely for the sake of being different, but was content with solid music-making. The only slightly unusual element was bowing the vibraphone with a string bow to make it "sing" rather than clunk the notes. But that's not so usual as all that.

I arrived at the hall at 7:40 expecting the usual 8 p.m. program, only to find to my dismay that it had begun at 7. So, to my shame, I missed the Einbond premiere and the Davies work. Nothing to be done. You win some and you lose some, but what I did get to hear was most enjoyable for me and the uncommonly enthusiastic audience.

*Heuwel Tircuit* is a composer, performer, and writer who was chief writer for Gramophone Japan and for 21 years a music reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle. He wrote previously for Chicago American and the Asahi Evening News.



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