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Earplay Salutes Elliott Carter

2008-10-20

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"American Tapestry," opened Earplay's 24th season Oct. 20 at Herbst Theater, featuring the works of five living American composers. Guest bassoonist Rufus Olivier brought depth, humor and technical wizardry to tether the experimental music.

Balanced by cello, violin and piano in Jennifer Higdon's *Dark Wood*, named for bassoon, his abrupt notes, squat polyps of sound, interleaved off-beats of piano and plucked cello. Higdon moved between this perky mix and more sustained material, with melancholy cello singing to slowly descending bassoon. Dan Reiter's deep bowing alternated with explosive runs, while Terrie Baune used her violin to run down long stairwells of scales, a theme Higdon explores in other works. The piano, monochromatic in contrast, avoided chords and hammered single repeated notes.

As part of the celebrations surrounding Elliott Carter's centenary Earplay performed three of his works. Carter, a disciple of Nadja Boulanger in the 30's, continues to compose as his 100th birthday approaches, Dec 11. His later work explores musical set theory while relaxing a stricter math in service to more expressive impulses.

Peter Josheff performed Carter's clarinet solo, "Steep Steps," with meditative octaves and twelfths, perhaps the steep intervals of the title. With the private improvisatory quality of a Degas keyhole portrait he explored a phrase, then deconstructed and floundered in the pieces. Carter is as expressive with intervals as Higdon is with criss-crossing scales.

Flutist Tod Brody and violist Ellen Ruth Rose joined Josheff for Carter's one minute long "Canon for Three Equal Instruments--In Memoriam Igor Stravinsky," a lively discussion with evenly weighted lines, each instrument repeating the motif in octaves and augmented fourths. Carter, whose early career included teaching math and physics, may have been contrasting octaves with the abrasive half-octave, the augmented fourth, for a paean to the irrational square root of two. And he actually makes it work.

Olivier returned to join Rose for a bassoon/viola duet, Carter's "Au Quai" for a romp. Though the playing was superb, the texture doesn't quite gel, perhaps requiring a bridge between viola's delicate steel and bassoon's sturdy vulnerability.

Two composers were on hand to help deliver their pieces. Eric Zivian performed in his own premiere of "Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano" with Reiter on cello and Josheff on clarinet. Clarinet sang high wild phrases, countered by cello's long-bowed thoughts. Abrupt piano gestures completed the odd palette, made odder by its use of traditional sonata forms.

Cello harmonics led the middle section, with lovely steps down into deeper sonorities with bass clarinet. There was an underwater quality, murky with flashes of colorful chords, and they finished with a dramatic rondo.

Argentine-born Pablo Furman manned the computer and multiple speakers for his "Sureña," a violin solo in five movements brilliantly performed by Graeme Jennings. Live runs danced around the pre-recorded and distressed tracks for effects that felt timeless: hugely amplified violin served as the narrow present, with computer-vague prophecies and electronic echoes. Themes broke apart, fragmented memories or premonitions. When Jennings plucked a string and the reverberations kept building we knew that we were on the wrong side of the mirror, the balance of fire and ice broken in the glass.

The Earplayers reassembled for William Kraft's "Vintage Renaissance and Beyond," a gently demented baroque composition. Tod Brody set the tone with a piccolo version of fifteenth century material, and the musicians wandered in and out with churchly tonics and modern slides. Michael Seth Orland played piano chords which evolved into clusters of left-over notes with the harmonies removed. These 'anti-chords' framed cellist Thalia Moore, whose gentle harmonic screeches turned to queasy slides. In the middle movement her delicate and round bowing recreated the prayers that inspired Kraft.

—Adam Broner

Originally published in the Piedmont Post