

THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

A PLACE TO EXERCISE IDEAS BEFORE WRITING ABOUT THEM WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE.

TUESDAY, MAY 16, 2017

Takemitsu Rises Above an Uneven Program of Earplay Premieres

Last night in the ODC Theater in the Mission, the Earplay ensemble presented the last of its three concerts in its 32nd Season. The title of the overall season was *Air, Wind, Water* with one noun assigned to each of the concerts. The season also had Toru Takemitsu as its focus composer, and each concert presented a Takemitsu concert involved with the element after which the concert was named. Thus, last night was the *Water* program; and the Takemitsu composition was his piano trio "Between Tides."

As is usually the case, however, Earplay programming for the evening was devoted heavily to new and recent works. This included the world premiere of the group's latest commission, Eric Moe's cycle of four songs *Tough Songs about Death*, as a memorial for Earplay's first conductor, J. Karla Lemon. There were also world premiere performances of Cindy Cox' "Lift-up-over sounding" and Kyle Bruckmann's "centripetals/centrifugals" and the West Coast premiere of John Liberatore's "while I sleep." The Liberatore performance was dedicated to Earplay violinist Terrie Baune and her husband Nick Marlowe. Baune was unable to play last night owing to the recent death of her husband, and the violinist for the evening was Joseph Edelberg.

All of this made for considerable diversity and the promise of a stimulating journey of discovery. However, as I recently explained to a friend, the immediacy of the listening experience is sustained only by what is remembered (a phrase I happily appropriated from Alice B. Toklas); and, in that context, the Takemitsu composition, now over twenty years old, rose impressively over the rest of the program. To be fair, however, this may have been a problem of personal context. Regular readers probably know that yesterday I did some deep diving into the piano music of Olivier Messiaen; and, from the very beginning of his career, Takemitsu was drawn to the music of Messiaen, as well as that of his French predecessor Claude Debussy.

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

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STEPHEN SMOLIAR

Still trying to "liberate the mind from fear, superstition and pettiness."

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Indeed, the piano part of “Between Tides” owes much to Messiaen’s capacity for building up rich chords as piles of thirds and then endowing them with a rhythmic flow that gracefully weaves its way around any underlying metric pulse. Considering the “subject” matter of this composition, it is hardly surprising that Messiaen, who often seemed to value the world of nature more highly than that of human beings, would have established an implicit presence (if not an explicit one) in Takemitsu’s depiction of the advance and retreat of tidal flows. One might say that the piano part (artfully realized by Brenda Tom) embodies those flows, while the lines for violin and cello (played by Thalia Moore) seem to stand as observers on the shore, almost drawn into the hypnotic power of the visual experience.

Those who follow the chamber music scene, particularly with a preference for the recent, may have been at the Center for New Music last month when “Between Tides” was performed at a program cleverly entitled *In Sea*. This is music that definitely deserves such multiple exposures by different players. Indeed, it may make one of the best cases that the piano trio genre was still alive and well at the end of the previous century. Other piano trio groups should take note (so to speak).

Among the recent works “centripetals/centrifugals” had the greatest impact. Composer Bruckmann himself played English horn in this piece that definitely favored the lower registers. The other players were Tod Brody on alto flute, Peter Josheff on bass clarinet, Ellen Ruth Rose on viola, and Loren Mach on vibraphone. During the pre-concert conversation (led by Richard Festinger), Bruckmann talked about finding the right balance between improvising and working from notation.

In some respects “centripetals/centrifugals” may have been inspired by the way in which Terry Riley’s “In C” found that balance; but Bruckmann’s results occupied an entirely different space in the domain of attentive listening. Indeed, the distinctiveness of that space is captured by the piece’s title. The performance of “In C” is a process of “fanning out” from the notated score in a manner that could easily be called centrifugal. Bruckmann, on the other hand, pursues the interplay of that “centrifugal force” with a balanced “centripetal” one. The attentive listener is thus drawn into the balancing of dispersion and collection, an “ebb and flow” that, no doubt through sheer coincidence, made for an engaging complement to Takemitsu’s perspective on tides.

By all rights Moe’s commissioned song cycle should have been the high point of the evening. Indeed, much of his discussion during the pre-

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concert conversation involved his thoughts about the four poems by Dorianne Laux that he set and his appreciation of the distinction of what words can say and what words set to music can say differently. That occasion provided an opportunity to skim through Laux' texts and appreciate how each poem had its own "semantic cell" that provided Moe with a point of departure.

Sadly, however, the music was performed in a darkened space in which following the text during the performance was impossible. This should not be taken as a criticism of soprano Christine Brandes, who delivered a solid and well-articulated delivery of melodic lines that ingeniously wrapped their way around Laux' words. However, it felt as if the power of Moe's approach owed much to the use of music to take its own unique stance on the relationship between the rhetoric of the words and the underlying semantics of the poems themselves.

These were poems that deserved to be seen and read. (Even line-by-line title projections would have undermined the reading experience, since the shapes on the page added another necessary dimension of signification.) The idea that concert listeners would be able to experience "all you need to know" through the "auditory channel" was nothing short of preposterous. The result was one of those sad cases in which negligent management of the space for both performers and audience undermined what could have been an intense musical experience.

The other participant in the pre-concert conversation was Cox. "Lift-up-over sounding" was clearly a product of the pursuit of some basic ideas that Cox shared with her poet husband John Champion. The ideas had to do with a perspective of the Amazon rain forest as a resonant space. Thus, Cox used the sostenuto pedal to keep the dampers of the lowest octave of the piano raised. This endowed the body of the piano with a "second rank" of resonant strings (the first being the highest strings, which have no dampers at all).

Unfortunately, resonance depends heavily of precise matchings of frequencies. At this particularly performance cellist Leighton Fong's pitch frequently lacked the precision to align with the necessary reference pitches, even when at least one of those pitches was provided by the bass clarinet played by Josheff, who was sitting right next to Fong. Far more effective was Loren Mach's work with an extended set of pitched drums, whose own distinctive frequency spectra provided a unique contribution to the resonances within the body of the piano. Furthermore, Cox' score required those drums to be struck in a variety of different ways, meaning that the drums themselves were also endowed with a repertoire of different reverberant properties.

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Nevertheless, what was lacking was an overall sense that Josheff's bass clarinet, Fong's cello, Tom's piano, and Mach's drums were all contributing equally and synergistically to the definition of the sort of rich resonances that triggered Campion's and Cox' impressions of the Amazon rain forest.

That failure of performers coming together to make the whole more than the sum of its parts also undermined the impact of Liberatore's opening duo. There was too much of a sense that both Edelberg and Rose were still finding their way through their individual parts. This meant that they did not yet have "cycles to spare" to address any issues of interacting as a duo. Liberatore's piece was very brief and emerged out of only a few fragments of musical ideas. Nevertheless, it was clear that he was writing for a dynamic engagement of two players that never quite came into focus last night.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:53 AM 

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