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THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

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

TUESDAY, MAY 1, 2018

Earplay's All-Premieres Program Wraps Season

Last night in Herbst Theatre, Earplay concluded its 33rd season, entitled *music without beginning or end*, with the last of its three concerts. The title of the program was *The Way Things Go*, which was also the title of Richard Festinger's contribution in his capacity as featured composer of the season. While it was composed in 2006, Earplay was presenting the West Coast premiere of "The Way Things Go." That performance was preceded by two United States premieres, which, in turn, were preceded by two world premieres, one of which was written on an Earplay commission.

There is always an element of risk in bombarding even (if not especially) the most attentive listener with so much novelty. However, the Earplayers presented an evening in which each of the selections tended (for the most part) not to overstay its welcome while, at the same time, establishing its own identity through its own distinctive features. Furthermore, each performance was introduced with a few informative observations to orient the listener; and four of the five composers were on hand to provide more extended accounts prior to the beginning of the concert.

The commissioned composition was also the newest, Jon Yu's "Pnema," a duet scored for clarinet (Peter Josheff) and violin (Terrie Baune), was just completed. The title is one letter short from "*pneuma*," which is the ancient Greek word for "air in motion," which can also be translated as either "breath" or "wind." It would therefore be fair to say that "Pnema" is a study of different perspectives on *pneuma*. The clarinet provides the more direct perspective, since the sounds it makes are, for the most part, controlled by the breath of the player. On the other hand the vibrations of the violin strings are also setting "air in motion;" so, as Yu put it in his program notes, the two instruments stand for "two sound worlds."

"Pnema" may thus be taken as a study of an encounter between these two "sound worlds." It is a study in which distinctions can either oppose or engage with each other. As a result the listener encounters

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

ABOUT ME

STEPHEN SMOLIAR

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

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an obligation to allow attention to oscillate between the subtle details of the sound sources themselves and the “wider perspective” of how those sources blend, harmoniously or otherwise. Achieving this effect clearly demands meticulous precision on the part of the performers; and both Josheff and Baune did an impressive job of bringing the ideas behind “Pnema” to an engaging state of fruition.

The other world premiere was of a decidedly older piece. Mark Wings originally wrote “Night-Voiced” for viola and organ in 2011. However, he explained to the audience that, while composing the piece, he worked on a version for viola and piano at the same time. He had been writing compositions for what he called a “viola-centric chamber music CD,” the focus of which was the body of sonorities that distinguish the viola from other instruments in the string family.

In “Night-Voiced” the driving sonorities, so to speak, come from the C string, the lowest of the viola’s four strings. Like the G string of the violin, this produces the instrument’s darkest tones; and the lower pitch in a larger frame makes for richer qualities in those dark sounds, particularly when the full length of the string is vibrating. One could appreciate why the composer would turn to organ pipes to match those sonorities; but, probably appreciating the difficulty of arranging performances for viola and organ, Wings wrote the piano version almost simultaneously with the organ version, shifting his thinking to how those viola reverberations would play off the sound of a piano.

Last night that piano version was played for the very first time. Having not heard the organ version, I am not in a position to compare and/or contrast. However, the viola is definitely the focus of attention; and Ellen Ruth Rose, to whom the piece is dedicated, provided an excellent delivery of the full richness of the sonorities that Wings had sought to evoke. At the piano Brenda Tom knew exactly how to allow her own sonorities to expand the scope of the mix, so to speak. All of this took place within the durational scope of a lyric poem (such as the one with a phrase by Carolyn Forché that inspired Wings’ title), making for a thoroughly absorbing listening experience.

The viola also took a leading role in the United States premiere of “and all the phonies go mad with joy,” a string trio with an eccentric nod to J. D. Salinger composed by Pablo Ortiz in 2009. Rose and Baune were joined by Thalia Moore on cello. While the viola may have been the intended focal point, much of the interest in this piece involved the composer’s imaginative approach to working with different subsets of the group in different sizes. What resulted was a background of duos and trio work that served as a context for that “leading role” of the viola. It is also worth noting that this piece, like “Night-Voiced,”

2018

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involved an exercise in changing instrumentation, since it grew out of an earlier piece Ortiz had written for viola and marimba.

“The Way Things Go” complemented the opening duo for viola and piano with a duo for flute (Tod Brody) and piano (Keisuke Nakagoshi). This was probably the most “classical” piece of the evening. It was structured in three movements consisting of a set of variations on a very short theme, a recitative in the middle, and a high-spirited conclusion. Each of these movements lasted only long enough to make its point, while the work as a whole demonstrated that one could still find innovative ways to depart from traditional concepts.

The only real disappointment came from the United States premiere of the music of Turgut Erçetin. Currently based in Berlin, much of Erçetin’s training came from the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford University. This led to his working on a series of pieces called *Resonances*, the second of which, “Tella,” was composed in 2016 and performed last night. The piece was scored for both E-flat and bass clarinet (both played by Josheff) performing with a string trio.

Erçetin did not do himself any favors by writing a note for the program book that consisted of two paragraphs of unabashed techno-babble. This was one of those pieces that threatened to require more time to explain itself than to be performed. Sadly, it was also the one piece that *felt* too long, even if that was not necessarily true of its clock-time. From the viewpoint of a “first contact” listener, the strongest impression was that the music, as it was written, seemed to have almost nothing (if not absolutely nothing) to do with resonance. Rather, it was a grab-bag of alternative performance techniques for all four of the performers, allowing the clarinetist to explore the domains of two different extreme registers.

The title was that of a made-up name of a young Turkish girl who wanted to give up her birth name. This allowed Erçetin to expand his written commentary to relate his techno-babble to gender issues in Turkey. For my part, I would have preferred a performance that did not have to labor under the weight of so much extra-musical baggage.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 8:03 AM



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