

THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

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

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2019

Composer Puts Meyer Sound Through its Paces

When the Diane B. Wilsey Center for the Opera, located on the fourth floor of the Veterans Building in the War Memorial complex, was completed in 2016, its most public space was the 299-seat Dianne and Tad Taube Atrium Theater, conceived as an intimate and flexible space that would allow for a variety of settings for new programming. In the interest of that flexibility, the venue had, for all practical purposes, no natural acoustics. Those were all provided by the Constellation® technology developed by Meyer Sound.

The most salient quality of any Meyer Sound installation is that one should not be aware of its presence. This means that moment-by-moment *control* of the technology is often vital to its performing most effectively. At my first encounter with the space in March of 2016 (for a *Winterreise* program that was more about artist William Kentridge than it was about Franz Schubert), I quickly realized that the learning curve for such control was likely to take some time.

Last night, for the very first time, I was able to experience the full impact of Meyer technology when skillfully deployed. The occasion was the first concert to be given in Earplay's 34th season. The overall title for the season is *Desire and Idea*, and the title of last night's concert was *Mise en abyme*. The final work on the program was *Flutter, Pulse, and Flight*, a suite by Charles Nichols that was the first of four works

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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commissioned by Earplay that would be receiving its world premiere performance.

During the pre-concert conversation, Nichols was very articulate in discussing his interest in bringing instrumental performance together with real-time creation of synthesized sounds. The three nouns in his title were the individual titles of his suite's three movements, each of which was a thoroughly engaging account of when those two approaches to performance engage symbiotically. Synthesis was based on software which, in turn, was based on real-time capture of the amplified sounds of the four instruments: flute (Tod Brody), clarinet (Peter Joshoff), violin (Terrie Baune), and cello (Thalia Moore). In his note for the program book, Nichols explained that the captured content was then "processed with modulation and delay effects, real-time spectral analysis and resynthesis, and live sampling and playback." What the note did *not* mention was that playback involved *projection* (a noun I picked up from following San Francisco Tape Music Festival concerts) of the sounds into the Atrium's three-dimensional setting.

This involved Nichols running his playback content through the Meyer control technology. The result was a thoroughly absorbing realization in which awareness of the physical space itself was put through an ongoing series of modifications that were as engaging as the underlying relationship between the physical and the virtual that sustained the overall logic of the composition. A key feature of the Meyer technology is that the loudspeakers themselves are concealed from view, meaning there are no visual cues for spatial orientation of the sounds. Just about all past performances in the Atrium space seem to have involved fixed settings of the control board; but last night that board was Nichols' own "instrument," whose role in performance was as important as what the four instrumentalists were doing.

Just as a good instrumentalist keeps the listening focused on the sounds themselves, rather than the technique of arriving at those sounds, Nichols' score enabled awareness of the variable nature of the

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position of the sounds without overloading any sense of presence with “special effects.” Edgard Varèse had envisaged such a listening experience for his “Poème électronique;” but neither the gear nor the control technology of 1958 was up to the realization of his ideal. Technology can now deliver the spatial experiences that Varèse had in mind; and Nichols knew not only how to provide content appropriate to that technology but also the performance skills required to realize the experiences themselves. He brought just the right blend of artistic creativity and technical skill to allow the Atrium finally to flex the technical muscles with which it had been endowed.

The other world premiere on the program was “Untamed Brush I” by Korean composer Hi Kyung Kim. This was a solo viola composition, written for and performed by Ellen Ruth Rose. It involved exploring a parallel between the individual lines of Korean traditional brush painting and the strings of Rose’s instrument. Performance involved a wide diversity of execution techniques (one of which resulted in one of Rose’s strings breaking, after which the string was replaced and the piece was played again from the beginning). The nature of Kim’s intended parallels was not always explicitly clear, but the diversity of sonorities that Rose evoked was sufficient for engaging listening.

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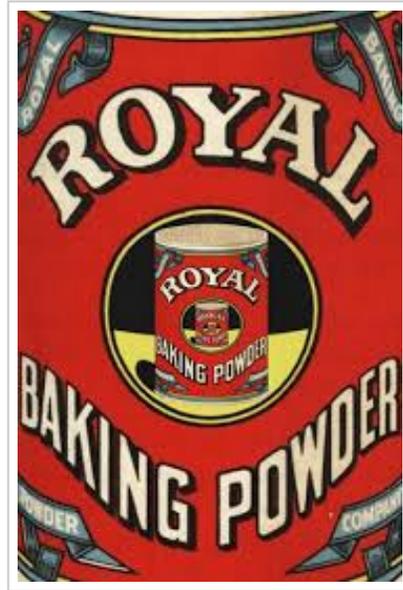
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Mise en abyme on a can of baking powder (realized as an animation by Feliks Tomasz Konczakowski on a Giphy Web page)

The title of the program was motivated by the inclusion of Tristan Murail's "Paludes" for its United States premiere. The literal translation of *mise en abyme* is "placed into abyss;" but it refers to the recursive technique of embedding an image within an image. Thus, the above can of baking powder has a label that includes the same image of that can of baking powder; and one descends into a bottomless pit of images within images. In a similar way "Paludes" is the title of a book by André Gide whose content is given similar recursive treatment. Scored for alto flute, clarinet, violin, viola, and cello (Leighton Fong) and conducted by Mary Chun, there was no shortage of diverse and engaging sonorities; but the sense of an abyss (recursive or otherwise) never quite came across.

The same could be said of Patricia Alessandrini's "Homage à Purcell," also receiving its United States premiere. This involved another imaginative approach to real-time performance from a computer keyboard engaging with the quartet of Josheff, Baune, Fong, and

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► 2011 (312)

► 2010 (426)

► 2009 (505)

► 2008 (652)

► 2007 (661)

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9/11 (44)

action (194)

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Brenda Tom on piano (again conducted by Chun). The score itself involved deconstruction of funeral music that Purcell had composed for Queen Mary (better known for having been appropriated by Stanley Kubrick for his film version of *A Clockwork Orange*); but the deconstruction was so fine-grained that any sense of Purcell's presence would have required considerable imagination from the listener.

More effective was Stephen Blumberg's "Aura." Scored for clarinet, cello (Moore), and piano, the sense of "aura" was created by having the sonorities of one instrument reverberate through the sonorities of the other instruments. Fortunately, the execution made for a listening experience as engaging as the concept had been imaginative. It emerged as an enjoyable example of how recursion did not necessarily require "echos" from electronic gear; and, by all rights, it deserves more attention at future chamber music recitals by equally imaginative ensembles.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT [8:02 AM](#) 

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