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A Tolling of Themes

BY JULES LANGERT

0 COMMENTS

Earplay's 23rd season came to an end Wednesday night at Herbst Theatre with a concert of four chamber pieces written over the past quarter century, plus a major work by British composer Peter Maxwell Davies from 1975: his ample, richly textured *Ave maris stella* (Hail, star of the sea), for six instruments. Based on a plainsong theme with nine continuous variations, and lasting 25 minutes, the piece is dedicated to the memory of a friend and fellow member of the trailblazing chamber ensemble The Fires of London. Each of the variations encompasses a different mood, from the austere lyrical opening to the meditative, elegiac close, where a series of slow repeated notes sounds out like a muffled tolling of bells, then quickens to a jarring, jangling climax before subsiding into the poised, reflective final cadence.

Pianist Eric Zivian and marimbist Daniel Kennedy were outstanding in extended solo passages crucial to revealing the expressive variety and intensity of the music. Even so, there is a detached asceticism about this piece that can leave a listener relatively unaffected, in spite of the composer's skill and command of musical rhetoric.

The opening half of the program, which was a component of the San Francisco International Arts Festival, included the piano trio *Wortschatten* (2004), by Spanish composer Hèctor Parra, winner of Earplay's annual Donald Aird Memorial Competition. Its single movement pits the piano's lean, percussive writing against a wide-ranging and tightly woven legato duet for violin and cello. By the end of the piece, the two contrasting textures have been reconciled in a shared, intertwined threesome, bringing the music to a satisfying close.

Calm Shattered

Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino's *Lo spazio inverso* (1985) is also built around a dichotomy of textures. A mood of introspective tranquillity pervades this composition, as soft, repetitive pulses of sound emanate gently from the ensemble of flute, clarinet, cello, and violin. Then, periodically, the celesta shatters the calm with a sudden, bright onslaught of runs and tone clusters, after which the original texture reforms itself. Sciarrino is adept at judging the coloristic effect of his instruments, and he finds subtle ways of holding our interest in this simple but glowingly attractive piece.

The concert began with *Xerox Book* (2001), a brief set of nine kaleidoscopic miniatures, for piano and percussion, by Wisconsin composer Christopher Burns. A pattern of repetitions links these diverse movements together, like the vibraphone ostinato in one piece, and, in another, the antiphonal beating of two metallophones (metal equivalents of a xylophone), one held by each performer. Enigmatic and full of surprises, this piece set the tone for what was to follow.

In *Presto con fuoco* (1997), by Swiss composer Beat Furrer, pianist Brenda Tom set up a steady chordal grid against which flutist Tod Brody unfurled a stream of sputtering, short-breathed motives spiraling upward and then restarting. The exciting, propulsive motion worked well for a time, but then lost impetus from lack of development or a suitable contrast.

Throughout this Earplay ensemble concert, unity and variety were the key elements, successfully managed in different ways by Parra, Sciarrino, and Burns, but not quite there in Furrer's composition.

Jules Langert is a composer and teacher who lives in the East Bay.

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