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Earplay opens new season

2017-01-30

The colors of air

Earplay, the Bay Area's premiere contemporary ensemble, performed a fiercely intelligent concert at Herbst Theater last Monday, Jan. 30. This is their 32nd year – and it is hard to believe they have been commissioning and playing edgy music for 32 years – in a season titled "Air, Wind, Water." Each of the three concerts includes works by Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, whose work is masterful in its colors and silences.

Monday's concert, the first of the series of three, was titled "Air," the medium of inspiration and sound, and the title of the last work that Takemitsu wrote shortly before his death in 1995. That solo for flute, in a haunting performance by Tod Brody, had the pacing and inwardness of breath.

Earplay conductor Mary Chun stepped out on stage to greet us and talk about the program. "This is vibrant music, and you will not hear it anywhere else with such ferocious lyricism!" And the excellent musicians proceeded to prove her statement.

The concert began with the first work that Takemitsu wrote at the young age of 19, a piano solo that he titled *Romance*. Brenda Tom used the repetitions and disturbing palette of *Romance* to take us into Takemitsu's post-WWII world, and it felt like we were hearing a requiem for those still living. There was a stillness and hunger to the phrases, and like his last *Air*, there was the pull and push of breath. She slowly built to earth-shaking chords, and then subsided back into soft dissonance.

The other works on this program, including two premieres, also shared something of that language: a feeling of gentleness, the susurrus of phrases that create their own time, and a powerful understructure.

Elena Ruehr's *Blackberries* (2007) for clarinet, cello and piano followed. Based on a poem by her ten-year-old daughter, this was fresh and loving, and Brenda Tom's piano sounded as bright and distant as memories of childhood. Peter Josheff took a clarinet through popsicle intervals and sharp sweet high notes, perhaps a child's voice, while the cello, played by Thalia Moore, added rich rumbles and clear sustains, deep earth and bright sky. This was the stuff of wholeness, with each instrument building a narrative.

Next came a premiere, commissioned by Earplay. *Fray*, by Laurie San Martin, was composed for a trio of violin, viola and cello, and composed specifically for the three strings of Earplay. Violinist Terrie Baune and violist Ellen Ruth Rose joined cellist Moore, and the three began by tuning up. Moving seamlessly from tuning into the piece, one eventually realized that the open fifths was the beginning, a clever play on a piece named *Fray*, and perhaps this was also about the fraying of "strings." The three movements were improbable and brief, with cello abrupt and deep, viola painting a threadbare backdrop of trills and arpeggios, and violin moody and occasionally fierce.

The middle movement evoked a quiet desperation with quick furtive cello gestures and Baune playing low in her violin's bottom register. It was dark, almost Shostakovich, but gradually the three turned more to each other, easing into the rhythms of a dance and the sense that they were dancers mirroring and holding each other. They returned to the fifths of tuning, building that into babble and then slowing for high ghost tones, a lovely fraying away of the motive.

A high point of the concert was Peter Josheff's *Sextet*, written in 2010 and then revised in 2012. Josheff, a clarinetist and founding member of this ensemble, is also the composer who co-founded Sonic Harvest, a yearly festival of works for chamber ensemble and voice. He described this return to purely instrumental writing as both relief and challenge. "Composing *Sextet* after [writing the opera *Inferno*] was a retreat to a safe haven," wrote Josheff. "A chance to breathe and to think private thoughts... to be at ease with my own voice."

Brody opened with flute whippoorwill attacks and notes that bent to sour, each steadied by a clarinet's stolid answer. Under them, the strings plucked and the piano plinked for a resonant and open weave. This was the exoticism of Ravel with bird-like flute phrases and gentle outbursts, the lyrical and the unexpected. As the cello sang against piccolo slides one also felt a native quality, like the sharp smell of piñon trees in the late summer and the quick crackle of open fire, and something as prosaic and moving as dust in the sunlight.

The second movement was thicker in texture, almost slurred, and even more French in its dreamy colors and touch of longing. This was gentle music, but still partly of this world, a Taoist counterpoint to Takemitsu's inwardly-focused Zen.

Afterwards, I asked Josheff why the clarinet, his chosen instrument, was not more in the forefront, and he replied that he liked it being in the background. "I see it as an instrument that can blend the others."

Rounding out the program was Tonia Ko's delightful *Plush Earth in Four Pieces*. Inspired by a passage by Nabokov, the phrase "part jewel, part mud" caught Ko's fancy, and she wrote this piece to explore that contradiction. Her duet for violin and piano did catch each texture. Baune's violin created notes as hard and glittery as icicles in the first movement, climbing to stratospheric skirls. And then, inhabiting the slurring ooze of mud, Tom took a turn at the bottom of her keyboard with big rolls. Quiet notes bubbled up through those rolls, odd scales mimicked by violin, and one might wonder if we were hearing a synthesis of forms, the effervescence of mud.

Earplay's next concert is "Wind," Monday, March 20 at ODC Theater in San Francisco, and will again feature Takemitsu along with four other composers. That program includes a prize-winning work and two Earplay commissions.

Peter Josheff will have the premiere of his new The Dream Mechanic by the SF Chamber Orchestra on Feb. 24 and 25 in SF and Palo Alto, and on Sunday, Feb. 26 at 3:00 p.m. at St John's Presbyterian Church, 2727 College Ave in Berkeley. That concert is free, and includes French songs and an arrangement of Schubert's most famous quartet, Death and the Maiden. As this concert is free, plan to come early.

—Adam Broner

Photo below is of the Earplayers, from left: Mary Chun, Thalia Moore, Tod Brody, Ellen Ruth Rose, Brenda Tom, Peter Josheff and Terrie Baune.



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