

THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

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TUESDAY, MARCH 20, 2018

Earplay's Program of "First Contact" Experiences

Last night in the Taube Atrium Theatre, Earplay presented the second of the three concerts prepared for its 33rd season in San Francisco. The title of last night's concert, *Magnetic Commentaries*, seemed about as cryptic as the one for the entire season, *music without beginning or end*. Of greater significance is the plan to play one composition by Richard Festinger at each of the three concerts.

Last night's offering in this series, "Kleinen doch emsigen," was written on an Earplay commission and completed last year. The program also presented the world premiere of another work commissioned by Earplay, Maija Hynninen's "Glow within." Another premiere was that of the winner of the 2017 Earplay Donald Aird Composers Competition prize, "Aeropittura" by Daniel Godsil. There was also a West Coast premiere performance of the fourth piece in a series entitled *Soundings in Pure Duration*. This was scored for solo viola, played by guest artist Julie Michael, and eight channels of electronic sounds. The remaining work on the program was Vera Ivanova's "Sagittarius," composed in 2015.

"Sagittarius" was the most accessible of the evening's offerings, although listening was probably facilitated by the introductory remarks that Ivanova presented during the pre-concert conversation led by Earplay Board member Bruce Bennett. Composers talking about their own work can be a dicey matter; and the risk of the speaker leaving the listener "as befogged as before" (as Anna Russell put it about explanations of Richard Wagner's *Ring* operas) is always present. Perhaps because English is not her first language, Ivanova knew how to offer a straightforward account.

"Sagittarius" was the result of a call-and-response project with the "call" coming from Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Tierkreis*. The title is the German word for Zodiac, and the work is a cycle of twelve short movements each played on its own music box. Twelve composers were invited to respond, one for each of the signs of the Zodiac. Ivanova's response took the metric pattern of her "call" as a point of departure, a

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The author's construction of his reality of self!

ABOUT ME

STEPHEN SMOLIAR

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Earplay's Program of "First Contact" Experiences

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Center for New Music: April, 2018

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series of eight measures, each with a different number of beats: 5, 6, 7, 4, 3, 1, 2, 8. She used this pattern as a basis for seven variations, although the theme itself only appeared in the fifth of those variations. Nevertheless, the ways in which she managed the resources of the five performers (flute/piccolo, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano), as well as her decision to begin by presenting material in a canonic form, provided enough familiar grounding for the attentive listener to grasp and appreciate her approach to variation.

Festinger's piece also followed a call-and-response approach of sorts. "Kleinen doch emsigen" translates from German to English as "small but diligent." It amounts to a textual response to the first line of a duet for soprano and alto from Johann Sebastian Bach's BWV 78 cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele* (Jesus, you, who are my soul). The line from the text is "Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten" (we hasten with fragile but diligent steps).

If the music is also a response to Bach, that response is far from intuitively obvious to even the most diligent observer. In his own conversation remarks Festinger talked about his interest in a broken consort, reflecting a pre-Baroque practice of an ensemble bringing together different families of instruments. In "Kleinen doch emsigen" the families are strings (a trio of violin, viola, and cello) and winds (flute and clarinet). Festinger also suggested that the strings provided a basic foundation upon which the winds contributed embellishments.

This turned out to make for an engaging listening experience. The strings established a context that almost sounded like a newly-discovered manuscript of chamber music by Béla Bartók. The austere polyphony of that context then shaped the perception of the interjections of the winds, some of which reflected the bird-like sounds that the first violin interjects during the third movement of Bartók's fourth string quartet. Mind you, any sense of Bartók himself was only marginally greater than that of Bach; but the spirit of Bartók seemed to provide the context in which Festinger could summon his own unique voice of expression.

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Futurist Giacomo Balla's *Abstract Speed + Sound*, a precursor of the *Aeropittura* movement (from Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

There was also a decidedly unique voice in Godsil's "Aeropittura" (aeropainting), a musical response to the call of the Italian Futurists from the first half of the twentieth century. Godsil caught the spirit of of the Futurist fixation on technology as inspiration for art; and he was particularly good at capturing the spirit of old airplane engines in his score for flute, viola, cello, and piano. The composer's background in heavy metal guitar probably helped him hone that particular skill.

As to the other composers on the program, the Hynninen premiere had a definite problem of referential opacity. Beyond appreciating the sonorities coming from juxtaposing flute/piccolo and bass clarinet, the attentive listener would need more than one listening opportunity before finding ways to orient the mind behind the ear. Dashow's piece was a bit more straightforward, at least in the clarity of interplay between viola and electronics. Old dogs like myself, however, would probably wonder if this was not just a reconception of Mario Davidovsky's *Synchronisms* compositions with better technology.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:52 AM 

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