

THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

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

TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2022

Earplay Returns to Live Performances

Last night the Earplay new music ensemble returned to the Diane and Tad Taube Atrium Theatre for its first performance before an audience since the onset of pandemic conditions. Like many of the performing arts groups, they maintained audience attention and interest through video performances, which were presented monthly in a series entitled First Mondays. Nevertheless, there was no substitute for the physical experience of the “immediate present” of a concert performance.

The original plan had been to begin Season 37 this past January 31. However, that program, entitled *Dream Sequence*, had to be rescheduled; and the later date has not yet been announced. As a result the season began last night with a program entitled *Siren Glow*. That program presented the works of seven composers, all of whom were new to the Earplayers. Four of the works preceded the intermission, followed by the remaining three.

Most important was the performance of the latest (2021) Earplay Donald Aird Composer Competition winner. That winner was the Polish-Austrian composer and cellist Tomasz Skweres; and the composition he had submitted was a string trio entitled “Elusive Thoughts,” performed by violinist Terrie Baune, violist Ellen Ruth Rose, and cellist Thalia Moore. The fact that this composition is structured as six very short movements brought Anton Webern’s Opus 9 set of six bagatelles to mind. However, Skweres’ composition definitely had its own palette of sonorities, as well as its own rhetoric of brevity, all compelling enough to leave me hoping for another performance in the not-too-distant future.

The program also provided a platform for two world premiere performances, both by Northern California composers supported by Earplay commissions. Josiah Tayag Catalan is currently teaching Music Theory and Composition at California State University in Sacramento. “Light, Smoke, and Siren Glow of Mist” is a duo for flute (Tod Brody) and viola (Rose), which he completed in 2020. It was inspired by “The True Color of the Sea,” a poem by Barbara Jane Reyes; and the transparency of his score evoked the elemental qualities of light, smoke, and mist.

Emma Logan used her commission to revise “A Certain Slant of Light,” which she had originally composed in 2018. This was also music inspired by a poem, this time by Emily Dickinson. There is an old joke that any Dickinson poem can be sung to the music of “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” One does not have to have encountered many Dickinson poems to realize that this assertion is wrong, and Logan chose a poem whose verbal rhythms differ wildly from just about any other poem that Dickinson wrote. Like Catalan’s composition, the music was scored for only two instruments, violin (Baune) and viola (Rose).

Both Catalan and Logan discussed their works in the pre-concert conversation moderated by Earplay Board member Bruce Bennett. Sadly, there was too much “temporal distance” between the discussion and the performances themselves. However, that shortcoming may have actually been advantageous, allowing the attentive listener to

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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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experience each composition on its own terms, free of any explanatory background. Suffice it to say that both works fared well under the immediacy of “first contact” listening.

The other work on the program that made a lasting impression was Brody’s performance of “Homeland,” composed for solo flute by Allison Loggins-Hull in 2018. The notes in the program book made it clear that this music had a political agenda. The tension of that agenda clearly informed Brody’s performance, but it was clear that his solid technique provided the foundation for that tension. If Loggins-Hull had an agenda, her skills as a composer rose above that agenda without neglecting it unduly.

The remaining three works on the program succumbed to what I like to call “information overload.” The fact is that, when an entire program is devoted to new listening experiences, mind reaches a level of capacity before all of those experiences have run their course. Thus, by the time Matilda Hofman conducted the quintet of Brody, Peter Josheff on bass clarinet, Baune, cellist Thalia Moore, and pianist Brenda Tom in the concluding work on the program by Simone Cardini, mind had already been filled to overflowing. Perhaps the process of getting to know new repertoire is better facilitated by YouTube videos as a viable substitute for that “immediate present” of performance before an audience.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:25 AM 

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