

May 20, 2013

Earplay Plays to Spellbind

EARPLAY

BY JERRY KUDERNA

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The final concert of Earplay's first series of concerts at ODC in San Francisco focused on works for solo strings, featuring a rare performance of Arnold Schoenberg's String Trio, Op. 45 (1946). Schoenberg's motto "One must believe in one's inspiration" was placed on the cover of the programs for Earplay's 28th season to show that intellect and inspiration are not incompatible. This was borne out by both the choice of works presented and in their realization in stunning performances by this dedicated ensemble.



Earplay

The curtain raiser, *Scrim* for solo viola by Alexander Elliott Miller, was winner of this year's Earplay Don Aird Composer's prize. The viola is usually considered the laid back member of the string family but you would never have known it from the dazzling sounds coming from the fearless Ellen Ruth Rose. The composer claims Van Halen as one of his influences (his own instrument is guitar) and it showed in the wide (and wild) variety of sounds that he asks for — and gets — from the instrument. Fluttering arpeggios were coupled with unearthly sighing in the upper register in lyrical sections that showed off Rose's beautiful tone. These were punctuated by passages of agile playfulness and percussive effects that did indeed sound like guitar riffs. But more than mere effects, Miller created a variety of moods that forecasts a voice worth listening to.

Rose was then joined by violinist Terrie Baune and cellist Thalia Moore in Schoenberg's String Trio, Op. 45. One of the composer's most personal and challenging scores, it is an iconic work of the so-called "12-tone school" which is currently out of fashion and abandoned with orders not to resuscitate. Written when he was 72, it is a actually a throwback to the programatic works of the composer's youth: a musical description of a near fatal heart attack. He describes his intentions in a commentary on this life and death struggle, which he called in English, "My fatality." This surely accounts for the agitated sections and the unusual (for Schoenberg) glissandos that take the piece literally to the edge. It also contains the only literal repetition of a whole section of music in the composers output, as though he saw his life passing before him. This performance surpassed all others I have heard in both sincerity and genuine passion. But it was the calmer sections that revealed Schoenberg's heart. The touching poignancy of Terrie Baune's final phrase, a descending sixth, faltering, yet fearless, still lingers in memory.

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After intermission, cellist Moore was joined by clarinetist Peter Josheff and Pianist Brenda Tom for *Trio d'apres Schoenberg* by Patricia Alessandrini. The composer was a performer as well, albeit an electronic one, modifying the instrumental sounds coming from the stage via laptop a few feet from where I sat. She seemed to evoke a spaced out harmonic skeleton of the Schoenberg Trio coming from the next world, or at least from the Paris studios of IRCAM. *Trio d'Apres Schoenberg* was six minutes of musical gooseflesh, and, tautly conducted by Mary Chun, it held the audience spellbound.

A movement for solo violin from a larger work, *Metal, Terre, Eau* (1982) by the Vietnamese Ton-That Tiet, played by Baune seemed to pick up where the Schoenberg Trio left off. After the drama of the Schoenberg and the aftershocks of the Alessandrini, it seemed as if a halting voice had revived and were conducting a dialogue with itself. Baune gave a meditative quality to the rapid trills and tremolandi alternating with jagged virtuoso passages, tossing off both with a magisterial calm. A mantra like passage leads to a serene and inevitable conclusion.

Richard Festinger, one of Earplay's founders writes music that, like that of Alban Berg, looks both forward and back. Beneath its attractive surfaces there are depths that require participation by the listener. His new quartet opposes two duos: violin/cello with clarinet and flute (played by Tod Brody). It's title, *Kleinen, doch Emsigen*, refers to a well-known (at least to KPFA listeners) Bach Cantata, and the composer evokes "small but diligent steps" that are the essence of chorale writing. The piece seems to evolve rather than proceed, and generates a counterpoint of incremental changes that yield a synthesis of drama and inaction. A fitting conclusion to a stirring and thoughtful concert.

Jerry Kuderna is a pianist who teaches at Diablo Valley College.

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