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January 2002

Volume 9, Number 1

INTERVIEW	High Spirits with Jonty Harrison JOHN PALMER	1
CONCERT REVIEWS	Looking Forward	5
	Ought One	5
	Babbitt and Fluxus	8
	Extended Injustices	8
	Composer's Best Friend	9
	Phantastic	10
	Time and the Seasons	10
	Count On Esterhazy DAVID CLEARY	11
	Of Mice and Washington GARRISON HULL	11
	Next Wave Song ANDREW SHAPIRO	12
	Freedom Fighters and Red Tape MICHAEL MCDONAGH	13
	Quarter-Tone Russia ANTON ROVNER	13
	Silver Shining Strands SONDRA CLARK	14

	Front-Loading for Fun and Profit	15
	Geographic Dancing	15
	Of First and Second Rate	15
	MARK ALBURGER	
BOOK REVIEW	A Review on Don Gillespie's Retirement	16
	RICHARD KOSTELANETZ	
CALENDAR	For January 2002	16
CHRONICLE	Of November 2001	17
OPPORTUNITIES		21
WRITERS		22

ILLUSTRATIONS

i	George Harrison poses with Shiva, 1971
5	Microphone cable
6	Karlheinz Stockhausen
7	Mary Lou Newmark - <i>Green Angel</i> (Green Angel)
8-9	Dogs
10-11	Mice
12-13	British Army soldiers
14	Charles Ives
15	Alfred Schnittke

High Spirits with Jonty Harrison

JOHN PALMER

Jonty Harrison is an internationally recognized composer of electroacoustic music active in Great Britain.

PALMER: Why do you write music? What is the inner motivation, the urge which drives your artistic creation?

HARRISON: I'm not sure I really know the answer to that! I began composing when I was about 15 (though the less said about my early efforts, the better!) and its importance just grew through my undergraduate days until it became obvious that this was what I did; this was me! But that doesn't explain 'why' I write music.

PALMER: Your electroacoustic music has achieved international recognition and you have become a major force within the acousmatic scene in the United Kingdom. Can you tell me how everything began and what was attracted you to the electronic medium in general?

HARRISON: The interesting thing about this is that I was a late starter in the studio. As an undergraduate at York I could have done a studio course, but that wasn't where I was at that time. It was only at the end of my first postgraduate year that I felt I really should go into the studio to see what it was all about - and even then I thought of the studio as simply another resource, an extension of my instrumental thinking. Of course, after I'd worked in there for a few weeks I began to realize that the studio was turning my notion of music on its head, because what it gave me direct access to was *sound*. As for formal instruction in the studio, well... one of the undergraduates gave me a 40-minute introduction to the place, then left. After that I was on my own. But I was very lucky - this period of my life overlapped with the presence in York of Denis Smalley, who had come to York from the GRM in Paris, bringing with him and inside knowledge of the French approach to studio work (the 'electronic music' scene in Britain at that time -- 1974 -- was still dominated by a more Cologne-oriented approach. Denis and I spent hours discussing studio issues and I am particularly grateful to him for allowing me to sit at the back of the studio and actually watch him work. I think my methodology and approach owe much to this experience. Trevor Wishart also worked in the York studio at this time, so I was also able to hear what he was up to -- even to the extent of participating in the source recordings of *Journey into Space*. Great days!

PALMER: And what has attracted you to the acousmatic music genre, as opposed to live electroacoustic music?

HARRISON: Well, I didn't really identify what I was doing as "acousmatic music" at first. I was doing "tape music" or "electroacoustic music," which still admitted the possibility of a live instrumental or vocal presence. And for many, many years I still considered my studio work and my 'paper' composition as equal parts of my identity. I have a reasonably full catalogue of mixed works to prove this -- and even a couple involving live electronics (though I have to confess that, growing up in the analogue era, live electronics have always filled me with fear and dread, simply because of the sheer unreliability and unrepeatability of the systems involved). And many people have said (and I think they are right) that my instrumental music *sounds* electroacoustic.

I guess this is a result of a preoccupation with sound as a total entity, involving texture and organic transformation over time, rather than with the more traditional preoccupations of composers with pitch, duration, etc, which are more readily measured in discrete, architectonic terms. But, back to my studio/paper identity crisis - I have to come out of the closet here and confess that I knew increasingly during the 80's and early 90's that I was living a lie! I really *was* an acousmatic composer. It was clear to me that, no matter what I was up to in the studio, when I sat down in front of manuscript paper, all the old serial/post-serial hangs-ups came surging back and I was composing notation, not sound! So in about 1994 I gave up writing for instruments and, with one notable exception, I've not written for live performers since. The exception is *Abstracts* for 8-channel tape and large orchestra - the motivation for this was my old friend and colleague at Birmingham, Vic Hoyland, who urged me to write for the University Orchestra. And with the number of instrumentalists at my disposal (there are 48 separate wind parts for example!), I felt that I would be able to approach the richness and complexity available to me in the studio. I composed the tape part first, incidentally, and only then sat down to compose the orchestral part. And what was interesting about this for me was that the piece almost wrote itself, without my post-serial baggage getting in the way.

PALMER: I have your beautiful CD *Articles indéfinis* on the empreintes DIGITALes label which contains works written over a time-span of almost 20 years. How would you describe your artistic development in general and your compositional preoccupations over the past two decades?

HARRISON: I would say that my earlier tape pieces (which were created at the same time as I was still protesting to everyone that I was also an instrumental composer, remember) are quite abstract - they concern themselves with a (fairly traditional) musical discourse, albeit with a rather broader timbral palette than in instrumental music. The best example of this is probably *Klang* which is available on the NMC label and (plug, plug!) on my new empreintes DIGITALes CD *Évidence matérielle*. *Klang* started from the sound of some casserole dishes I discovered in Denis Smalley's kitchen when I was working at UEA in about 1979 (Denis was working abroad at the time, so I was staying in his apartment). The sounds in the piece might be recognizable as casserole sounds, but the musical discourse is independent of this fact - there is no sense in which 'casserole-ness' imparts compositional meaning to the piece. The musical structure is abstracted (as Simon Emmerson would put it) from the sonic material and the piece, as its title implies, is concerned only with that abstracted sound world. This makes it, I suppose, classic Schaefferian *musique concrète*, because what I have just described springs, essentially, from what Schaeffer calls "reduced listening" (where the sound object is defined by its sounding characteristics and not by reference to its source or cause). Regarding the works on *Articles indéfinis*, I would say that *Pair/Impair*, *Aria* and *...et ainsi de suite...* fit into the same broad category. In several of my acousmatic works dating from *after* my abandonment of 'paper' composition, however, there is a much more evident (and much more conscious) use of recognizable sound for its very recognizability -- reference and recognition are now an active part of my thinking. I call this "expanded listening" and I'm not even sure that the term "music" in appropriate any longer.

I'm a musician by training and background, so I think of it as music because I think of myself as a musician; but if someone else wants to call it "sonic art" (Wishart) or "acousmatic art" (Dhomont), that's fine by me. I'm sure that the label itself doesn't matter.

PALMER: The acousmatic tradition has obviously had an enormous impact on your artistic creativity both at an aesthetic and practical level. Can you tell me what is it that you found so interesting in the acousmatic notion of composition?

HARRISON: At its simplest, that acousmatic music starts, continues and finishes with *sound*. It is based on *percept*, not *concept* and, because it is not tied to other imperatives (visual images, for example), has the ability to fire the imagination and transport the listener in astounding ways.

PALMER: ...and what has this preoccupation changed in your compositional mind at a practical level, for example about the way you perceive music in general and the 'sound object' in particular, and the way you listen to any sound event? I guess this must have been a fascinating process in both your mind and ears...

HARRISON: Well, the changes are the issues I've been discussing - and they happened gradually over the years since first venturing into the studio. Usually my compositional practice has moved (driven by my ears) into new areas and the intellectual rationalization has come later. I'm not too worried about this, despite the widespread assumption that an academic (which I suppose, technically, I am!) should actually *know* (consciously, intellectually, I mean) what s/he is doing and why, at the time of doing it. My ears *know*; it just takes my conscious mind a little while to catch up!

PALMER: Let's take your work *Unsound Objects* (1995) for example... What was the genesis of this music?

HARRISON: Well, I'd like first to make an important point about what you earlier called the "compositional mind." I would say that my compositional mind is not, *cannot*, be independent of *specific* material. This is the *real* meaning of "concrete" in the term *musique concrète* -- it's not simply the use of "real world" sounds recorded with a microphone as source material. For me, composition is a *partnership* between material and composer, each interrogating and challenging the other to work out the next step in the process of musical creation. In my case at any rate, the "compositional mind" is not something which imposes abstract "musical" speculation on inert sound material. Sound material is not inert! You ask about *Unsound Objects*. I'm an obsessive collector of sounds. I now travel with two DAT machines and a mini-disc recorder, much to the irritation of my family. I guess the materials I chose to use in *Unsound* were essentially referential and likely to be recognizable by listeners. As it would therefore be impossible to expect listeners to be able to exercise "reduced listening" in such a framework, I chose instead to exploit this very recognizability in working on the piece. This is an implicit challenge to Schaefferian orthodoxy about the definition of the sound object through reduced listening; my approach is dangerous and, hence, "unsound." As for the actual processes and so on in the studio -- well, I guess you could say I followed my nose (or, rather, my ears); there was no preconceived plan or structure. The material and I evolved the specifics of the piece as we went along, as was an organic process.

PALMER: In this work you achieve multiple layers of connections between abstract and abstracted sounds resulting, as you write, in "a continuum of reality, unreality, and surreality." Can you amplify this?

HARRISON: Well, I think this is what I was alluding to above - the ability of material to be heard/perceived/understood *simultaneously* as abstract musical events, sound events abstracted from the real world to participate in a musical discourse and soundscapes referring to real world sound events we may all recognize. In addition, this very recognizability unleashes in individual listeners echoes of their own personal histories -- and these ambiguities are what makes the acousmatic medium so exciting and so powerful.

PALMER: One of the main characteristics of your tape music is the vitality of the sonic gestures. There is a recurring sense of impulse which goes hand in hand with a meticulous attention towards sound-color and timbral transformations...

HARRISON: Well, I would certainly hope that was the case, or the sonic surface of a piece would be very dull. The "impulse" archetype is a personal favorite, probably because it is believable -- it *could* exist in the real world. By contrast, I'm not keen on reversed sounds, because they are physically *impossible* - remember, ambiguity is one of my big interests! Transformations are fascinating because they play with the borders of our perception: at what point do we know that object A has become object B? Ambiguity again!

PALMER: You are the founder of BEAST amplification system. Can you tell me how, why and when everything began? What did you want to achieve with BEAST?

HARRISON: I founded BEAST in 1982 when I started doing tape concerts at the University of Birmingham. I used the four channels of amplifiers and speakers we had in the Studio, augmented by some speakers of my own. The system grew during the late 80's and in 1990 we were something of a hit as the main concert system for the ICMC in Glasgow. I even had to do an impromptu "introduction to the system" presentation by popular demand. What I wanted to achieve was, I suppose, appropriate standards of presentation of tape pieces in public listening spaces. By this I mean restoring the spectral/spatial detail and the dramatic intensity of works which the acoustic properties of public performance spaces tend to distort. To do this you have to have large loudspeaker arrays, even for stereo pieces and even in relatively small auditoria.

PALMER: In retrospect, are you happy with the results you have obtained so far, or are there other paths you would like to follow with BEAST? I mean also, but not only, from a technical point of view, for example...

HARRISON: Well, there is growing interest in multi-channel formats -- I've now done three eight-channel pieces myself -- so that is where the major research and development needs to be done. The logistical complexity of controlling multiple source tracks, however, rises exponentially the more tracks you have.

PALMER: You are regularly touring with BEAST worldwide. This must be a very exciting -- and indeed tiring -- aspect of your musicianship...

HARRISON: Yes, but it's worth it when we get the kind of reception we got at the *Inventionen Festival* in Berlin last July. When I'm introduced to people at overseas conferences and they say, at the mention of my name, "Oh yes - BEAST! It's worth all the hard work if we're making a difference.

PALMER: Surely you must have experienced technical problems and shortcomings during performance. How have you coped with these situations throughout the years? And what has changed between your approach of, say, 20 years ago and now?

HARRISON: Well, the frivolous answer would be to say that if you stick to performing acousmatic music on a fixed medium, a whole lot of variables are removed from the equation! Live electronics is a bit of a nightmare by comparison, but it is, of course, much better in these digital days.

PALMER: How would you place the acousmatic genre within the contemporary music scene both at an aesthetic and practical level? Why do you think it is so important?

HARRISON: I would say that there certainly is a place for acousmatic music on a worldwide basis. You might not get a full house for an acousmatic event in a given city (unless it's Paris or Montreal), but these days, that is less necessary than the fact of being part of a world-wide, networked interest group. It's much harder to persuade the local regional or even national arts organizations of the merits of the cause, because the music business is driven by sales (of tickets and CD's). But acousmatic music has a place in the greater scheme of things and I doubt it will go away, despite the temptation to subjugate it to visual media.

PALMER: Yet, if we look at today's music industry we see how marginal the electroacoustic genre still is... Although there is a growing number of electroacoustic composers worldwide, I don't think the majority of music festivals and institutions, not to mention contemporary music promoters and publishers, are showing an adequate consensus and awareness of the importance of this genre...

HARRISON: Yes, but you've missed out the most important group -- *everybody* is now potentially an electroacoustic composer, given the infiltration into modern life of the computer and the sound card! It is no longer necessarily tied only to "music festivals and institutions, ...contemporary music promoters and publishers."

PALMER: What could be done to improve this situation? You are also a key-member of Sonic Arts Network, the British electroacoustic music society: surely you must have addressed this problem several times.

HARRISON: I'm not sure that any one person or group has the right to do anything to 'improve' the situation! Who is defining improvement? Sure, we always need more resources, more events, more money, more access, more information, etc. But Sonic Arts Network cannot deliver *all* of this single-handed -- it simply doesn't have enough money to do it (even though, without wanting to blow our own trumpets, I think we make a valiant attempt to address as many of these issues as we can). I believe that the fundamental role of Sonic Arts Network is to support and promote the sonic arts. But let me stress the word *Network* in the name of the organization. Surely Sonic Arts Network should be the web which binds together activity in the sonic arts in Britain and links that activity to what's going on elsewhere. It doesn't need to be centralist to do this.

PALMER: In Britain, for example, there is a clear aesthetic split between acousmatic musicians and those composers who are entirely, or largely, live-electronics based. Look at the London Musician Collective, for example, with its own, rather specific, music scene. How do you perceive this dichotomy?

HARRISON: I would say that we should let many flowers bloom! I have no problem with "difference," in all its manifestations -- it's what makes being alive so fascinating!

PALMER: ...which brings me to another important point: what is actually electroacoustic music? This question first came to my mind during my first 'professional' visit to the USA. I still remember a conversation we had during the 1996 SEAMUS Conference in Birmingham, Alabama, in which we both agreed on a definition of "electroacoustic music" resulting from a specific aesthetic of sound, that is the transformation of sound in its timbral and "abstracted" qualities, rather than the use of electronic means in composition merely as amplification devices or reproduction tools of acoustic instruments. Although your music speaks unequivocally for itself, could you revive your thoughts on this rather crucial issue?

HARRISON: I think I've got pretty close to answering this question in addressing some of your other points. For me, much music described as "mixed" or "live electronic" is still essentially instrumental in concept. I find it a shame that so much music continues to ignore, or -- worse! -- be unaware of the new ways of thinking heralded over 50 years ago by Schaeffer. If I ever did another "live electronic" piece (and the possibility is getting closer all the time!) it would be tackled from the acousmatic end of my experience, rather than the instrumental.

PALMER: Is your musical creativity inspired by something in particular? I am thinking, for example, of extra-musical forms of arts or specific philosophical notions...

HARRISON: No! I'm inspired by sound!

PALMER: You have also written several acoustic works which are perhaps less known than your electroacoustic music. How do you experience writing for both media? Are you still writing pure acoustic works today? Is this for you a conflictual situation or rather a unifying musical circumstance?

HARRISON: I think I've droned on enough about this earlier!

PALMER: And you are also a conductor... I remember attending your impressive London performance of Stockhausen's *Momente* a few years ago...

HARRISON: Yes. I must say, I get an almost visceral thrill out of conducting. Of course it's interesting to note the similarity between working as a conductor with an orchestra and working in the studio... in both cases one is probing what is musically possible with given material, without actually *producing* the sound (in the real sense) oneself. But shaping it and enabling it to sing - oh yes!

PALMER: How important is the relation between sound and space in your music?

HARRISON: Crucial -- but I'm much more interested in space as an inherent property of my sound objects (I *never* use mono source material!), which the material/composer partnership teases out into larger-scale musical structures (an *organic* process), than I am in what I suspect is more normally thought of as "space": the *placing* of objects in a particular location (an *architectonic* process).

PALMER: You have advocated the notion of sound diffusion, rather than sound projection. Can you amplify this difference from a practical performance-related listening experience? How do you deal with this important aspect of performance logistics within BEAST?

HARRISON: I simply mean that sound does not travel in tight, focused, controllable beams like lasers (though, of course, there are differences between on- and off-axis frequency response) - it diffuses into the entire space. So I prefer to talk about diffusion than about projection.

PALMER: And then, of course, there is Jonty Harrison the academic. I often think of your outstanding achievements at the University of Birmingham (BEAST being "only" one of them). Amongst many achievements you have been able to create an international center of excellence for electroacoustic composition. How do you actually experience being an academic?

HARRISON: I try to provide a supportive and sympathetic environment for composers: decent resources, regular supervision by someone whose ears have been at this business longer than theirs, a large enough community of fellow travellers to avoid the isolation which can so often lead to demoralization and being "blocked," the opportunity to collaborate and the opportunity to perform at professional level.

PALMER: What is your educational vision regarding electroacoustic music?

HARRISON: If you have something to say, I'll try and help you say it! I'll also try to point you in the direction of anything/anyone else who may be able to help. But please don't turn into a clone of me!

PALMER: What can be done to improve awareness towards acousmatic music in today's educational world? I am thinking particularly of certain music colleges which tend to represent a rather conservative approach to contemporary music.

HARRISON: Well, I fear that the current financial climate -- in the UK at least -- means that institutions are on the receiving end of thinking which is driven more by quantity than by quality. Of course, there are some very good social reasons for this. The problem for music in any form is that it is an expensive subject to study and to teach -- just think of instrumental tuition, spaces for private practice, rehearsal and performance spaces, let alone the studio equipment. Nevertheless, I suspect that current concerns over "access" to university may very well recognize that there is a "market" (arg! just listen to me!) among people who are currently exploring sound on their home PC's!

PALMER: Talking from experience, we usually find that the least interested students are those coming from a strictly "classical music" background who tend to gravitate around the music conservatory environment, rather than the university's... What do you think we could do in order to improve this situation?

HARRISON: This has not always been my experience. I feel that my greatest "successes" have been in, if you like, "turning round" students with a rather traditional, instrument-centered view of themselves through opening up to them the possibilities offered by the studio. Remember that when they arrive at university they have dedicated over half their lives to becoming proficient on the clarinet or whatever, so it is hardly surprising that this is how they define themselves as musicians. But to see people go through the process of discovering that they are also composers (in fact that they are more composers than any other kind of musician) is exciting for me as a teacher.

PALMER: On a larger scale, how do you perceive the world music scene at the moment?

HARRISON: Hmm... I'm not sure I know where to start. Have you got another hour?

Concert Reviews

Looking Forward

DAVID CLEARY

Janus 21 presents *Drama and Dreams*. August 7, Pickman Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

The best of the recent selections performed by the Janus 21 ensemble (August 7 at the Longy School in Cambridge, MA) was William Thomas McKinley's *Tango Variations for Violin and Piano*, an intensely dramatic showpiece featuring flashy, idiomatic writing for its two players. While McKinley never relinquishes the characteristic rhythmic patterns of this dance genre here, he refuses to let its stock figures hamstring his imagination. The piece proves full of quirky surprises, particularly in terms of harmonic progression and phrase length, while still harnessing these myriad twists and turns into a convincing overall shape of perfectly gauged length. Harmonies employed are mainly tonal, usually triadic in nature but not always traditionally functional, sometimes hinting at Messiaen or Ravel. The performance, by violinist Andrew Kohji Taylor and pianist Timothy Bozarth, was highly demonstrative, at times skating perilously close to the overwrought.

Sonata-Monologue by Nikolai Shabalin is quintessentially Russian in sound, suggesting an updating of Shostakovich's oeuvre—particularly in its rhythmically chugging second movement and resolutely expressive third movement. Despite a tendency to dissipate its fascinating opening ideas into more neutral material, this is a stylish, nicely written composition that proves very good to hear. Cellist Alexei Romanenko played it thoughtfully.

The remaining two pieces, scored for mezzo-soprano, keyboard, and percussion, showed different takes on the concept of ritual and proved to be of varying quality. *The Death of the Witch of Endor*, by Daniel Pinkham, grapples with the problematic concept of one-person opera and achieves a capable success. Cast in a dissonant triadic idiom, the work makes copious use of declamatory text setting and sparse, block like accompaniment that at times suggests an Orff-like austerity. And despite its minimal staging, the work projects sufficient drama to merit an operatic designation. Jurij Konje's *Nocturn in Dialect* proves a more problematic listen. With its borrowing of non-Western idioms, employment of exotic percussion instruments, and shapeless, repetitive, often ritualistic feel, one can strongly hear the influence of George Crumb's vintage output. But the writing here is less colorful and engaging and the vocal part at times sounds less than gratefully conceived. Singer Jane Struss was highly effective, depicting Pinkham's witch with haunting, cavernous subtlety, and putting forth Konje's sometimes-awkward voice part convincingly. Her diction was strong and her voice quality was plush yet full of presence. Konje on percussion and Bozarth on harpsichord and piano provided strong support.

Ought One

DAVID CLEARY

Ought One Festival. August 25, Montpelier, VT. A second program is given on August 26.

The *Ought One Festival* is the brainchild of Dennis Bathory-Kitsz and David Gunn, perhaps best known as curators of the *Kalvos and Damian's New Music Bazaar* radio show (weekly accessible in online format and via airwaves over WGDR-FM radio in central Vermont). While the events given this weekend occurred in four downtown Montpelier venues, a decent bit of the music presented would have nestled comfortably on downtown New York style programs such as those encountered at the Bang on a Can series. As one might expect from an ambitious undertaking that spotlights a truckload of cutting-edge work, the concerts varied in quality, though there were a significant number of essential presentations. Your reviewer was able to hear thirteen of the thirty-eight offerings, regrettably having to forego live events by the '01 Composers Interactive Ensemble, Beth Anderson, Michael Arnowitt, Joseph Benzola, James Bohn, Joseph Celli / Jin Hi Kim, Manfred Clynes, Ensemble Uh Maybe, Ensemble VCX, Martin Alejandro Fumarola, Beth Griffith, Tom Heasley, Brenda Hutchinson, Brian Johnson, Phil Kline, Elodie Lauten, John Levin / Ill Wind Ensemble, Logos Duo, Loons in the Monastery, Michael Lowenstern, Martha Mooke, Odd Appetite, and Eleanor Sandresky, as well as installations by 17 composers.

Three of August 25's concerts proved to be of particular distinction. Combined Concert 4, one of six such catch-all presentations this weekend, boasted four strong entities. Bathory-Kitsz's fine *RatGeyser* for MalletKat (an electronic marimba-like instrument) and playback sports highly varied textures heavy on wild flurries of notes; its structure, a wedge downward which folds back upon itself, is both readily perceivable and cleverly delineated. *QUIFF*, a solo tape work by Jon Appleton, attractively blends warm organ-like sonorities and gently percolating figures within its haunting, atmospheric overall feel -- a highly alluring listen. The two alto saxophone solos by Keith Moore could not have shown greater contrast. A Feldman-like sparseness suffuses *black box*, an entry full of special effects, hushed dynamics, and lengthy silences. The earlier *hiatus pitch* is ebulliently virtuosic, disjunct in line, and generally terraced in dynamics, plowing a most satisfying middle ground between uptown craft and downtown abandon. Both pleased greatly. Percussionist Michael Manion wielded sticks with gusto, while saxophonist Taimur Sullivan's performance was a model mix of vigor and control.

Flautist Margaret Lancaster presented an ambitious and exciting evening of music, much of it for amplified flute and tape. Works scored for this combination included Rob Constable's *Once-a-thon* and Paul Reller's *In Praise of Buddy Hackett* (both busy, snappy selections oozing with style and attitude that would have benefited from judicious use of blue pencil but are otherwise highly worthy), Kaija Saariaho's *Noa Noa* (nervously disjunct and jaggedly atonal with highly understated electronic backing), Eric Lyon's *Once-a-thon 2: The Kiss of Constable* (an able reply of sorts to Constable's piece that would have been better suited in a different part of the program), and Paul Steenhuisen's *cette obscure clarte qui tombe les etoiles* (which manages to impart appealing sinuosity to its busy flute lines, further underscoring them with a stuttering tape accompaniment). Steenhuisen's two other selections were very brief. *pomme de terre* for solo piccolo figuratively spiral-cuts its title potato, producing a bubbly plate full of trills, while the solo tape work *Poland is not yet lost* is a promising idea (distortions on an old recording of that country's national anthem) that merits further elaboration. *Piker*, by Larry Polansky, is a duo for piccolo and electric guitar; the latter provides a droning platform for its active soloist, who plays a tune that first evolves from isolated fragments to frantic swirling lines and then juxtaposes the two extremes. Its sense of direction is as clear as spring water. Appleton's *Stop Time* and Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Zugenspitzenanz*, solid listens both, ask the soloist to dance as well as play. The latter employs extensive modernist style choreography, while the former requires formidable tap dancing prowess—often provided as rhythmic counterpoint to the taped playback of a just-executed flute line. Lancaster's performance was stunning. Her flute playing was most impressive, featuring a keen sense of linear shaping, nimble technique, and substantial tone, even when prancing about the stage or lying flat on her back. And special commendation is due for her accomplished tap-dancing.

Drew Krause's sensitively rendered solo piano recital brought an uptown flavor to the largely downtown feel of the day's proceedings. *Fences* by Stuart Saunders Smith was one of the day's highest points, an exercise in East Coast pointillism with roots in Milton Babbitt's keyboard style that contains a winsome charm, clarity of line, and supple craftsmanship. Outlining a clear-cut ternary form, it was wonderful to hear. Krause's *Spoke Variations* is a massive, ambitious selection on the order of Beethoven's classic essay upon Diabelli's waltz tune. Scalar yet still atonal sounding, it can perhaps be faulted for obsessively slow unfolding and a block-like rhythmic sense, though the work's ear for large scale clumping and earnestly genuine emotional feel stamp it as a winner.

The remaining events of the day had positive elements, but proved less essential to varying degrees. Bathory-Kitsz contributed a somewhat less successful piece to the concert given by the electrified PoJo Guitar Duo. *His High Birds (Prime)*, coupling its players with a bird-call based tape playback, proves formally amorphous but exhibits an aggressively personable nature. Kimo Johnson's *shape up, shape down*, also for this grouping, festoons a hypnotic Joni Mitchell type ostinato guitar riff with clangorous interjections such as glissandi, punctuating verticals, and fragments of melody that often suggest snippets of rock solo breaks. This and *ii-v-i* for two guitars by Polansky were pleasing enough to experience if a bit shapeless. Polansky's work conjures up a static wall of sound that suggests process kinship without usually employing patterned material, asking the players to tune their guitar strings in microtonal increments as they go along. The solo mandolin closer *Prelude* by Ron Nagorcka, is brief and charming. Polansky and Johnson performed well.

Two members of Germany's Ensemble WireWorks, Jennifer Hymer on piano and Georg Hadju on electronics, gave a recital of avant-garde music mostly European in origin that contained more misses than hits. The best entities were *Sparks* for synthesizer and tape by Chris Brown (a brief piece in clear ABA format that suggests what Steve Reich might write for massed glockenspiels) and *Tombeau de Messiaen* for piano and tape by Jonathan Harvey (which cleverly intercuts and mingles sections of both showy flourish and microtonal embellishment of piano equal temperament). Manfred Stahnke's *Malaita* for prepared piano and real time electronics is jagged and colorful, painfully slow to unfold, but suitably effective for those with boundless patience. *Notes* by Vinko Globokar is an extended techniques speak-and-play piece along the lines of Tom Johnson's *Failing*; regrettably, the text is too dry and matter-of-fact (with overtones of a theoretical treatise) and the spoken material gets swamped when the pianist plays on the keys. Annea Lockwood's prepared piano piece *Ear-Walking Woman* proves nice to experience when one can in fact hear it, consisting of effects that involve softly scraped, rubbed, and plucked piano strings and altered sounds resulting from placing and rocking bowls, marbles, and other items inside the instrument. This fragile number proves nearly inaudible in a large hall such as the one in which it was given. Sadly, the piano and live electronics entry *Zwei Studien* by Dieter Schnebel is syllogistic, moves glacially, and lacks coherence. And Hadju's *Fingerprints* for piano solo, sorry to report, is weak in architecture, melodic appeal, and directional sense. Hymer's playing of the disparate keyboards was generally fine, though balances between live instrument and tape were not always optimal.

Combined Concert 1 featured two works each by two composers. The better of these were *Turnstile* and *Enkidu* for violin and electronic processing by Douglas Geers. Both exhibit expertly showy fiddle writing and a harmonic language that oscillates from triadic clarity to astringent dissonance; the former was fine, the latter a bit prolix. Violin soloist Maja Gerar was terrific, performing with charismatic flair and rock sure fingers and bow arm. The two Elaine Thomazi Freitas numbers, *a falta que ele me faz* for berimbau and electronics and *Reflect* for interactive dancer and electronics, proved imaginative in general concept but tough to listen to. Both suffered from monochromatic timbral palettes, shapeless structure, excessive length, and ear-splitting volume. Christine Towle's dancing seemed leaden and stiff, while berimbau player Gregory Beyer coaxed as much variety as possible from an instrument with the melodic range of a major second.

Sunday's events ranged from the heights of excellence to the depths of misfortune. The nadir was reached at Combined Concert 2, given over primarily to New Tonalist entries. The best of these was Greg Hall's solo piano piece *For Graham Fitkin*, an earnestly pleasing study in textures that expertly navigates harmonies ranging from Roy Harris-style polytonality to jazzy upper tertian aggregates. *Imitations* by Robert D. Polansky puts its four violins to work delineating quasi-canonic counterpoint to capable effect. Its sense of form is clear and its mood tellingly soulful. Louis Moysé's *Introduction, Theme, and Variations* for flute and piano, while not a bad listen in some ways, betrays an extremely close kinship to Debussy's sound world and suffers from a conception of variations as block entities without an overarching plan. *March Swale*, a string quartet by Beth Anderson, can be cited positively for not taking its genre label too closely to heart and indulging in some well-controlled surprises. But regrettably, the piece lacks a certain level of distinction, veering perilously towards a kitch-like feel; perhaps Anderson means a tongue-in-cheek effect here, but your reviewer cannot tell for sure. Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *Two Pieces for Violin and Piano* unfortunately traffic by turns in mushy sentiment and fluffy superficiality, containing chord changes that sometimes sound arbitrary. And sorry to say, *Improvisations* for solo piano by William Harris proves to be an undistinguished set of style studies. Moysé's work received by far the best performance, featuring excellent playing from flautist Karen Kevra and pianist Paul Orgel. Both Hall and Deussen turned in able keyboard presentations, which came across much better than Harris's diffident pianism. Sadly, the string players here (who will mercifully remain nameless) were decidedly not ready for prime time; slipshod technical execution, sloppy ensemble playing, and atrocious intonation were the rule.

Fortunately, the other concerts proved more satisfying. Combined Concert 3 featured two first-rate selections by electric violinist Mary Lou Newmark. *Prayer & Meditation* respectively suggests Hebrew cantillation and embellished Gregorian chant -- gorgeous, weighty, and evocative to experience. *3 on the Green* is dandy in golf and, as it turns out, equally fine in the concert hall. Its triumvirate of movements, a rondo alternating pizzicato and arco sections, an entity wedding jazzy and virtuosic touches to plaintive music, and a perpetuum mobile with attitude, is most effective. Both pieces make memorable use of spare electronic enhancement, usually in the form of dense reverb. *4BC* by Mary Jane Leach, scored for four bass clarinets (three of which appeared on tape here), manages to discover a great basis sound by asking its instruments to play in the bottom fifth of their range. The resulting combination of fundamental and overtone is beautiful to hear. Unfortunately, Leach basks at extraordinary length in this sonic bath without building a cogent musical entity. Peggy Madden's *Echoes of the MistWalker* for bass clarinet and tape combines myriad short fragments and a hobgoblin variant on the 3/8 tune from Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* into an uneasy mix. The work's relative brevity and attention to textural contrast were appreciated, though. Violinist Newmark and bass clarinetist Steve Klimowski gave strong performances.

This writer's *Bilbies IV* appeared among the offerings on Combined Concert 5; it was wonderfully well played by solo flautist Kevra. A particular highlight of this presentation was another flute solo, *Rooster's Court Ball* by Matthew Fields. It's a fun yet substantial charmer, sizable but never dull, consisting of stylized neo-Baroque dances cast in a harmonic language that mates elements of Prokofiev and Schoenberg without producing a monstrosity. Moysé's *Pastorale*, yet another unaccompanied flute work, is dead-on Impressionist but proves showy and attractive. *Jamie's Thrush* by Daniel Goode is less successful, content to have its solo clarinet line closely echo the taped call of a hermit thrush with minimal elaboration. A presentation of *Radio Music* by John Cage yielded a roomful of static on a Sunday in this isolated valley town—and given that not all four of the radios used were equally capable of producing hall-filling sound, one got even less variety than one might hope. Flautists Kevra and Jackie Martelle were tip-top, clarinetist Goode capable.

Kyle Gann's *Custer and Sitting Bull* presented the noteworthy *Village Voice* reviewer's solution to the challenge of practical one-man opera. The music, mostly pre-recorded, adheres to just-intonation scalar material; while thoroughly downtown-sounding (evoking subtle influences of pop music at times), it also deftly incorporates Native American song and Custer's favorite tune "Garry Owen." The actor plays synthesizer and respectively takes the part of both title personages. Texts, culled from the oral and written musings of these characters, are spoken, not sung—deriving performance challenges instead from coordination of speech and taped rhythms. While *Custer's* sketchy staging suggests closer kinship to cantata than opera at times, the piece exudes an earnest ritualistic feel and likeable sympathy for its Sioux protagonist. Overall, it's a sturdy, highly enjoyable experience. Gann's performance was both subtle and masterful, handling voice/tape synchronization with deceptive ease.

Nearly half of Nurit Tilles's first-rate piano recital consisted of works from the early 20th century, including a Ravel tribute to Haydn and two pieces entitled *Hommage a Ravel* by Arthur Honegger and Alexandre Tansman. Robert Helps's composition of the same name, while less directly evocative of the French master, is a gossamer delight built primarily of elaborations around patterned accompaniments. Paul Paccione's *Stations -- To Morton Feldman* could easily be mistaken for a work by the minimalist icon, which is to say it handles pitches in the same perfectly effective manner. The two-movement *Piano Sonata* by Tom Pierson weds neo-process techniques to this older blueprint, doing so in both a heavy, pounding fashion and warm, dreamlike way. It's not a bad listen. Tilles's *The Kitchen Table* and *Raw Silk (A Rag)* show this pianist's fascination with the genre Scott Joplin made famous. The first of these is unpretentious and charming, first-class *Gebrauchsmusik*, while the latter is an intriguing Chopinesque reinterpretation of the style. Both these and the three splendid inner movements of Charles Ives's *Sonata no. 1* were played from memory. Tilles performed wonderfully well, demonstrating well-grounded technique, a fine ear for color and voicing, and a forthright tone quality that can thunder or whisper with the piano community's best.

Eve Beglarian's presentation was an especial must-hear event. Scheduling conflicts forced this listener to take in only the first half of the concert, a collaboration between this talented artist and Phil Kline. The resulting listen, four *Songs from the Bilitis Project* for singer/reciter(s), alto flute, synthesizer, minimal percussion, bass guitar, and taped sounds, is a luscious, sensual evocation of love in its many facets: feral, warm, lush, ardent -- among the most knowingly sexy of recent music. Thoroughly downtown in style, it left much else of its kind heard at this festival far behind in quality and effectiveness. Beglarian, Kline, Lancaster, and Eleanor Sandresky played marvelously.

The finest event encountered at *Ought One* was its last, given by the Pierrot-plus-percussion sextet Non Sequitur. Nearly all the music presented was top-drawer fine. *Plekto*, a late piece by Iannis Xenakis, is brief and clever. Here, the piano and percussion rage in clusters and thwacks, disrupting the rest of the ensemble and eventually turning them to the same grouchy manner of speech. Taking the group's name to heart, Eric Lyon's two-movement *New World Sonatina* audaciously shoves sections of klezmer stylings next to uptown dissonant fragmentation, indulges in atonal fiddling gestures, and quotes the Renaissance mass tonemeister's delight "L'homme arme." It shouldn't work -- but somehow it does, and gloriously. Clarence Barlow's two entries, *Le Cixeau du Tom Johnson* for flute, cello, and piano, and *Canzonetta* for piano trio show its composer able to handle both dissonant pointillism and hearty tonality with assurance; both pieces possess buckets full of personality. *Musique de Tables*, by Thierry de Mey, is wonderful fun to watch and listen to. Here, three players sit at a long table and proceed to scrape, slap, snap and tap its surface. Coordinated physical gestures enhance the work's eager, cheeky sound universe. Ned McGowan's *Tusk*, for the ensemble minus piano, while not as stylish as the rest of the program, does make able enough use of colorist iteration of a single pitch and plausible variants thereof. A tasty arrangement of *Ah Um* by jazz legend Charles Mingus, featuring some impressive solo improvising, closed the program. Non Sequitur's performance was utterly sensational, easily rivaling the best groups of its kind in Boston, New York, or anywhere else. Hearty bravos go out to its talented members: McGowan (flute), Benjamin Fingland (clarinet), Gabriel Bolkosky (violin), Ha-Yang Kim (cello), Blair McMillen (piano), and Nathan Davis (percussion).

Performance venues generally offered good acoustics. Christ Episcopal Church, Trinity United Methodist Church, and the Unitarian Church of Montpelier all proved very presentation-friendly. One ought to have regular reprises of *Ought One*.

Babbitt and Fluxus

DAVID CLEARY

John Ferguson. September 13, Seully Hall, Boston Conservatory of Music, Boston, MA.

Milton Babbitt and Fluxus on the same recital? For pianist extraordinaire John Ferguson, it's all worthy stuff worth doing. His well-conceived evening of piano solo music on September 13 ran a wide range of styles, from 20th-century transcriptions of Bach to Romantic novelties to the above-mentioned dichotomy. It's true that Babbitt's *Semi-Simple Variations* (1956) is a tiny gem weighty with information -- but too many pianists get wrapped up in the details of this music, missing the work's overall charm. Ferguson's playing brought out the piece's winsome demeanor, eye for architecture, and sense of line while still respecting the printed page. The Fluxus selections (all dating from 1960-1964), while lacking the same level of crafty depth, demonstrate a similar level of brevity and friendliness to that in the serial master's piece; *Look* by Ben Vautier, *Piano Piece for David Tudor* by La Monte Young, and *Piano Piece, 3 Piano Pieces*, and *Incidental Music* by George Brecht total approximately 8 minutes of music. The first of these is especially clever, a funny send-up of the notion of the piano as furniture, not musical instrument; here, Ferguson placed a vase of flowers on the closed lid and spent the piece studiously admiring the blossoms from many vantagepoints. His performances of Jean Sibelius's curious post-Romantic entry *Sonatina op. 67 no. 1* (1912) and Arnold Schoenberg's hyper-expressionist masterwork *Six Little Piano Pieces op. 19* (written one year *before* the Sibelius!) were sensitive in sound and flawlessly executed in technique. And given the horrific terrorist outrage of two days prior, his selection of Rachmaninoff's transcription of *The Star Spangled Banner* as encore (played sans jingoist hype) was highly appropriate and welcome.

Extended Injustices

DAVID CLEARY

Extension Works presents *Common Injustices*. September 21, First and Second Church, Boston, MA.

The cover of the program for this concert was made up to resemble a parking ticket, complete with the word "violation" splayed across the top in large capital letters. But this event, a showcase for Extension Works pianist/composer John McDonald, proved to be as enjoyable as finding a wide-open, legal, cost-free parking spot in front of the venue just before showtime.

As one might expect from a concert featuring 23 pieces (all but one written within the last 100 years, with 17 of these composed during 2001), the quality of the music varied a good bit. The best included Marti Epstein's *American Etude No. 2: pedalled fifths* (1992), a haunting and lovely work of perfectly gauged length that affixes Feldman-like restraint to a static set of quintal dyads, Mark DeVoto's *Auburn St.* (1992), a warmly soulful updating of Satie's *Gymnopédies* containing hints of early Berg and Debussy, Ken Steen's *Driving Me Crazy*, which convincingly overlays a grumpy and clipped piano obbligato onto a tape part derived largely from automobile sounds, and Edward Elgar's rarely heard *Dream Children, op. 43* (1902), whose two simple yet effective movements respectively delineate wistful and sweet moods. Other pieces fell into the droll if disposable category, such as *Car Radio Rant* by Robert Carl, a grouchy diatribe against thudding, bass-heavy automobile sound systems, *Talk to Me!*, by Desh Hindle, a tape and piano selection that derives its humorous prerecorded material from automated telephone voice menus (but ultimately lacks the depth of Steen's piece), and *I Hate that Stupid Piano!*, by Mark Engebretson, which might best be characterized as a wacky mating of Tom Johnson's *Failing* and Victor Borge (among other things, the player is required to plunk out a melody with his nose). Elizabeth Brown's *Insomnia* was a better piece than these three, trafficking not only in obvious jokes such as a quote from "Rock a Bye Baby" but also in continuously clever and subtle frustrations of melodic and harmonic expectations.

Only a few compositions seemed genuinely thin on merit. *Just Add Water*, by Ingrid Stoelzel, proved unable to successfully reconcile its Ravel style-study main body to a performance-art framing sequence. And two selections by Christos Koulendros, *Fafotho* and *Radio Shut-Off at the End*, were incredibly short in duration and lacked memorable material or contour. Much of the rest were varying degrees of okay. Todd Nocera's *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon* was the better of his two contributions, an able enough balance of jazzy sonorities, Berg-like Romanticism, and occasional tango rhythms; his *Hymn IX.XI* is a thoughtful, if less convincing melange of pop touches and post-Wagnerian verticals. The last quality also aptly describes *Klavierstück, Op. 129 No. 1* (1956) by Johanna Senfter, a juicy if then-anachronistic stewpot of gushy octaves and slip-sliding progressions that owes plenty to Reger and Richard Strauss. *Service* by Julia Wertz is a short essay in East Coast angularity that exhibits a respectable sense of line and drama, while Ryan Vigil's (*not so un)common incivility* puts forth a rather Viennese-oriented expressionist nervousness. Harder to pigeonhole is *The Heaviest Penalty* by Luis Gonzalez, a work dissonant in sound but varied in technique and mood that sports sections both clangorous and thoughtful as well as a fugal coda. Sinan Dora's *The Cave* is ominous and unsettled in a post-Mussorgsky manner; while promising, it ultimately pulls its punches a little too much. And *Still Small Voice* for piano and tape by Arnold Friedman is an interesting idea that somehow comes across a bit too stilted and politically correct in execution; here the keyboard player puts forth a languid, heavily-pedaled, mid-range melodic line reminiscent of that in John Cage's *Dream* and then gradually hears it inundated with irritating contemporary sounds such as fax tones, cell phone rings, and canned laughter emanating from boom boxes carried by five ambulatory audience members.

McDonald's pianism featured myriad splendid attributes, including spry finger technique, lucid delineation of line and voice, and a tasteful, reflective tone quality that imparted magic to the music. His multifaceted compositions were also strong assets to this extensive lineup. *Threnody during Volatile Times* is an intelligently spun, yet moving variation set based on a short progression that is both cluster-laden and tonally grounded. By contrast, the otherwise antipodal movements of *Two Common Injustices* (1998/2001) share a gritty polytonal harmonic language and a mordant sense of humor. And *Proem Amid Detritus* delineates a clear downward wedge shape, beginning in loud, granitic fashion and becoming more resigned in mood. Each is a worthy listen. Best of all, McDonald managed to harness all of this evening's wildly disparate pieces into a cogent recital program that flowed well from start to finish; somehow, one didn't mind the average or weak selections within such a carefully sculpted overall framework—the whole here was indeed greater than the sum of its parts.

Composer's Best Friend

DAVID CLEARY

Kenneth Radnovsky and John McDonald. September 23, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

It's been said that the dog is man's best friend -- but those composers in our midst would be hard pressed to find a better crony than Kenneth Radnofsky. This fine alto saxophonist has been steadily commissioning cutting-edge works for his instrument since joining the New England Conservatory faculty in the 1970's. His most recent recital consisted almost entirely of music written especially for him during the past eight years—and the quality of these selections shows that Radnofsky chooses his collaborators wisely. Four compositions for sax solo written in 1999 comprised the concert's first half. Shih-Hui Chen's *Twice Removed* is splendid, convincingly exploring common ground between dissonant East Coast type gestures and more tonal material of Chinese derivation. It's a big, well-structured work that seizes the lapels with ardor. *Prologue and Scherzo* by David Amram is one of this eclectic composer's best pieces. With a sound world rooted in jazzy figures, tonally oriented quartal constructs, and jagged, yet clearly perceivable rhythms, one sometimes picks up the influence of composers like Bernstein and Copland here. But the work's subtle, yet effective formal sense and imaginative clouding of its Americana-derived harmonic idiom impart both grounded depth to the listening experience and personal fingerprints. And whether delineating plaintive or forceful moods, Amram's manner of speech compels. Michael Colgrass's *Chameleon* is dead-on tonal and very brief, but more packed with information than might appear on a cursory listen. Clipped figures, cantilena ideas, and quicksilver runs surprisingly coexist nicely, subsumed within the selection's well-chiseled profile. A quick peek at the title tells the listener much about *Flamenco sin Limites* by Jaime Fatas. Elements of this indigenous Spanish genre pervade the work, to the point of requesting the performer to stamp his foot in imitation of a flamenco dancer. Folksy, emotive, and well paced, it's pleasing to experience.

Pianist John McDonald joined Radnofsky on stage after intermission, providing first-class accompaniment support. “*San Antonio*” *Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano* (1994) by John Harbison was the first of many subsequent pieces requested under Radnofsky’s World-Wide Concurrent Premieres and Commissioning Fund endeavor (here, one composer is chosen to write a work which receives multiple simultaneous premieres the world over). With Harbison, terms like “sonata” and “symphony” are often found affixed to entries bearing tenuous similarity to traditional selections bearing these titles; here, one encounters a tripartite set of character studies rooted in dance styles ranging from tango to funk. Of course, no negative value judgements on the work’s merits are thereby implied—this is energetic, ingratiating stuff, excellent indeed. This reviewer has now listened to Gunther Schuller’s fine *Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano* (1999) three times and is happy to report that it holds up excellently under repeated hearings. What impressed this time around were the composition’s no-nonsense manner of speech and well-balanced construction. McDonald’s *Offering in the Form of a Quaddish* (2001), written within a matter of days as a response to the terrorist outrages in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania of less than two weeks ago, is a multihued lament filled with anguish and tenderness. Brief but heartfelt, it has the potential to see a bright future as an encore piece. Maurice Ravel’s haunting *Kaddish* (1915), arranged from the vocal/piano original, closed the program in moving fashion.

Radnofsky’s playing was superb, featuring clean finger work, exquisitely sensitive sculpting of line and structure, and a tone quality that was round yet penetrating. And he is also to be commended for calling into existence a first-rate body of saxophone literature, tangibly proving himself a most valuable comrade to the creators—and listeners—on our new music scene.

Phantastic

DAVID CLEARY

Auros Group for New Music. *Dance: Phantasm and Phantasy*. September 28, Pickman Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

When is a dance not a dance? The Auros Group’s September presentation gave some clue to the answer this evening. None of the three works programmed here indulged in overtly old-fashioned terpsichorean rhythmic genres, at least not for any extended stretch of time. Encountered instead were multi-movement concert pieces bearing a prodigious amount of kinetic energy and memorable profile that might well lend themselves felicitously to choreographic enhancement (in fact, as will be mentioned later, one such selection got the chance to tangibly demonstrate such a relationship)

Ghost dances, Imaginary Ballet for Five Players (1988), a piece by Nicholas Maw scored for Pierrot ensemble playing a raft of small percussion along with the usual instruments, presents a broad palette of moods and textures within its fourteen character-type movements. Nearly every sound world imaginable, from shrill folksy tunes for piccolo and E-flat clarinet to hushed *sotto voce* chorales to scrambling flute and violin figures over an oompah piano accompaniment to expressive cello solos to energetic Stravinsky-like changing meter material, can be heard. Truth be told, it all comes across as a bit *too* much of a good thing (the cornucopia of styles proving rather diffuse and bewildering), with the work’s large-scale sense of structural organization making more sense on paper than in practice (the thrice three movements with ritornelli and framing sections not clumping themselves obviously to the ear in a cogent way). But much is effective too, such as excellently idiomatic instrumental writing, attractive melodic material, and felicitous handling of harmonies that range from clangor to consonance. Of the three works given, David Rakowski’s *Imaginary Dances* (1986) was the one most mindful of proportion and structure. The composer’s careful ear for sectional and formal balance is obviously manifest: movements clearly possess beginnings, middles, and ends and are architecturally sound. Orchestrated for a sizeable complement that adds oboe, viola, and percussion to Maw’s Pierrot quintet, the piece manages to delineate busy, East Coast oriented densities without ever seeming clotted or stodgy. This is dramatic, energetic, well-argued music of much character and sense of purpose, a first-rate listen. *Bright Music* (1987) by Ned Rorem makes attractive use of its unusual grouping (flute, two violins, cello, and piano). While containing echoes of Copland, Bernstein, and Stravinsky in its clearly tonal ethos, this charming, delightful work never sounds like a slavish snitch of these composers or anyone else. Formal considerations are often traditional, but cogently expressed. The only blemish in this otherwise fine piece is a lopsided feel for comparative movement length; the warmly expressive fourth movement is much longer than its neighbors while the nervous finale comes and goes in an all too sudden flash.

Performances were uniformly excellent. Each piece offered significant solo opportunities for the players, with especially memorable efforts being put forth by cellist Jennifer Lucht, violinist Sarah Thornblade, flautist Susan Hampton, and clarinetist William Kirkley. Michael Adelson conducted with thoughtfulness and skill, keeping the ensemble’s sound lucid yet substantial. And the dance sequence entitled “Love’s Shadow” that accompanied the Rorem was terrific, imaginatively choreographed by Chip Morris and excellently executed by Jessica Chase, Becky Southworth, J.J. Stapleton, Tara Wells, and Aaron Wrigley. It was all enough to send one home tripping the proverbial light fantastic with a smile on one’s face.

Time and the Seasons

DAVID CLEARY

Boston Musica Viva presents *Of Time and the Seasons*. October 5, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA

It’s not unusual for concerts to have a common thread of a particular country: England, Germany, Greece, and Italy certainly come to mind before Finland. This Scandinavian land was a the fruitful jumping-off point for Boston Musica Viva’s most recent event.

This was due to the inclusion on the program of two local premieres by noteworthy recent Finnish composers. *Quintetto dell'estate* (1979), scored for Pierrot grouping, is Magnus Lindberg's oldest publicly acknowledged piece and a solid listen. Despite exhibiting a nervously angular sound world that shows sympathy for both European and American serialism (in particular demonstrating a certain motivic tightness), the work successfully incorporates aleatoric passages and repeated pitch material into the mix. Its overall sense of form is loose but convincing. Kaija Saariaho's *6 Japanese Gardens* (1995) is a curious selection, one that can be seen as being either engagingly ritualistic and uncluttered or irritatingly slow-moving and simplistic. This listener generally leaned toward the latter opinion, but appreciated the selection's colorful writing for its solo percussionist, if not the bare-boned tape events that appear in conjunction. Robert Schulz wielded sticks with accomplished abandon and knowing sensitivity.

Lewis Spratlan's *Of Time and the Seasons* (2001) was the first of two song cycles heard this evening. It too continued the program's enthusiasm with northern climes, being a setting of translated Finnish texts that date from the folk epic *Kalevala* to today. Adding soprano and percussion to the ensemble's usual Pierrot quintet, this excellent composition projects a dusky, autumnal quality that is most effective. Like the Lindberg, it ably incorporates static figures into a sound world that rarely contains them, here a dissonant, if tonally based idiom. Instrumental writing is excellently conceived and nicely supportive of the challenging vocal line. *Tempo e tempi* (1999) for voice and mixed quartet by Elliott Carter was the odd man out here, choosing instead to take poetry by three Italian authors and put it to music. Its eight movements show a Webern-like brevity and concentration of gesture without suggesting the great Viennese master in any overt way. Harmonies are craggy but felicitously handled and a complex yet clean sense of line is displayed. And Carter's Italian text setting is first-rate. Briefly put, it's a fine piece. Peggy Pearson (oboe), Ian Greitzer (clarinet), and Rebecca Thornblade (cello) made the most of the solo opportunities offered. And vocalist Lucy Shelton sang both selections wonderfully well, demonstrating a vibrant high range and substantial middle and lower registers in addition to solid diction and a keen ear for linear shaping. Richard Pittman presided over a set of performances that were of the highest quality.

Count on Esterhazy

DAVID CLEARY

Music at the Immaculate: The Esterhazy Quartet. October 6, Jesuit Urban Center, Church of the Immaculate Conception, Boston, MA.

The Esterhazy Quartet, based primarily at the University of Missouri, holds a concurrent residency at the Berklee College of Music. While adept at music from all eras, the ensemble elected to present an all-20th-century program this evening.

The string quartet medium appears to be a particular favorite for composer James Willey -- he has produced eight thus far. His single-movement *String Quartet No. 3* is a piece both strong and unusual, one that forges a distinctive voice despite subtle influences of composers as diverse as Ives and Carter. The former is evoked through this selection's employment of flinty linear gestures and a harmonic language that ranges from prickly dissonance to triadic clarity, while the latter's shadow is felt in the work's busy and irregular rhythmic figures which sometimes overlap in conflicting planes. And the formal layout utilized, a complex binary, is both cleverly constructed and lucidly perceivable. Frank Bridge's *Novelletten* shuns the usual "grand statement" ethos that dominates the quartet literature; here, one encounters moderate-sized character studies instead of weighty sonata edifices. The piece's sound world is that of post-Wagnerian triadic tonality as interpreted via the early 20th-century British tweed-jacket school, but fortunately the moods encountered, while often warm, possess friendly, lyric charm instead of pandering pastorality. Given that the Esterhazys specialize in performing Latin American composers, it was not surprising to see the quartet finish up with Alberto Ginastera's *String Quartet No. 1, Op. 20*. But despite the presence of south-of-the-border flavored melodic material, this piece speaks with a thick Eastern European accent; energetic repeated-note motor rhythms, swooping scalar gestures, scherzando pizzicati, and verticals that suggest a cloudy folk-like modality predominate. Briefly put, the shadow of Bartók looms imposingly over this selection—too strongly so, in fact. And the rather theatrical, broad brushstroke manner of speech used imparts a certain paucity of substance to the listening experience.

Violinists Eva Szekely and John McLeod, violist Leslie Perna, and cellist Darry Dolezal performed excellently. Solid intonation, confident solo playing, careful ensemble coordination, and a group sound that ranged from buttery to emphatic were hallmarks of the evening's presentation. The quartet should especially be cited for adjusting nicely to the church's cavernously lively acoustics. Bravos go to this group, one that feels mighty comfortable in our fair city despite calling the Show-Me State its first home.

Of Mice and Washington

GARRISON HULL

Washington Opera presents Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* (libretto by the composer after the novella and play by John Steinbeck), directed by Francesca Zambello, conducted by Karen Keltner. October 25, Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

Several perspectives are possible from which to gauge the success of an opera -- one is the number of productions received. Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* has been given 13 since 1997, making it the seventh most-produced North American music drama and a favorite among directors.