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21ST CENTURY MUSIC

November 2003

Volume 10, Number 11

NANCIA D'ALIMONTE	Philip Interview No. 3 ("Sinfonia Glassica")	1
CONCERT REVIEWS	9th Other	5
	KEN BULLOCK	
	Well-Dressed, Descending a Staircase	8
	MARK ALBURGER	
	Dessert and Dinner	8
	MARK ALBURGER	
	A Mother of All Operas	9
	MARK ALBURGER	
CHRONICLE	Of September 2003	10
ITEM	NED ROREM with CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN	10
WRITERS		10
ILLUSTRATION		

Brian Eno, David Bowie, Philip Glass (Philip Glass - *Low Symphony*, Point, 1993)

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HUMANITIES INDEX
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Philip Interview No. 3 ("Sinfonia Glassica")

NANCIA D'ALIMONTE

Philip Glass is one of the world's best known composers. His style, though controversial, is easily identifiable and familiar to both popular and classical audiences.

D'ALIMONTE: You wrote about your initial exposure to opera, and how it was much by chance... You visited the Met where you paid 50 cents to sit at the back-top of the theater and heard many operas -- both old and new. Did you do anything similar to prepare yourself for composing symphonies?

Glass: Yes. I spent time, when I was a student at Juilliard, attending Jean Morel's rehearsals and learning about orchestration. Morel was a conducting teacher and a very, very good musician. I knew a number of his students and I got the idea of auditing his classes and going to his orchestra rehearsals. The idea was to learn about orchestration, and that is where I really learned it. For example, he was doing Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and I would go and listen to his rehearsals with the score. He would often go over the piece section by section so one could hear every part being played and then put together. My graduation piece for my master's degree was an orchestral work which he critiqued by a reading with his orchestra. After that, I didn't write for such an ensemble again until almost 20 years later. I did a few small pieces, but there was very little interest in having composers write music for orchestra at that time. Also, I wasn't interested in writing a very long complicated piece and getting a couple of rehearsals in and having it played once and simply forgotten. Don't forget that I would have had to copy out all the parts myself -- a long task! Instead, I began writing for my electrified chamber ensemble.

The next opportunity that I had to write for an orchestra was Satyagraha in 1979. Then I discovered there was a whole other way of approaching orchestral music, via opera. There the situation is quite different, because one will often get five or six days of rehearsal, not five or six hours, so it was possible to sit with the orchestra at rehearsals -- to make whatever changes one might make, to work with the conductor through all kinds of problems of balancing and orchestration. That was the best preparation in writing for operas and was also the best preparation for writing for orchestra, because all of these elements become highlighted in the context of the voice.

D'ALIMONTE: During a rehearsal of the Dmitri Shostakovich *Symphony No. 7* third movement at the Eastman School of Music, I suddenly said to myself, "This 'sounds like Glass!'" Why the Russian reference, though not literal, in your *Symphony No. 2*? Was this an homage, remembering back to your earlier years listening to Shostakovich symphonies in your father's radio repair shop?

GLASS: I knew the seventh symphony quite well. When I think of the symphonies I have done, I think that the lineage of symphonic writing comes from a modernist's tradition -- Gustav Mahler and Shostakovich. In fact, with the fifth symphony that I've just finished, I have taken to the idea of including text, choruses, and solo voices.

A lot of 20th-century music got centered in a type of chamber music, with Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. Schoenberg invented an ensemble, and then proceeded to write a masterpiece with it. Then others hit upon related notions: Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez, Igor Stravinsky -- the idea that a contemporary ensemble would not be a string quartet or piano quintet or wind quintet or symphony, but would be some kind of collection of winds/strings/percussion that would produce a sound that would be identified with that piece. That is a very strong tradition of 20th-century music.

There was another equally strong tradition of symphonies, which was less noticed. But if you look at symphonic music, there is a very dramatic flowering and development of the idea of the symphony. If you go back to Joseph Haydn and you end up somewhere with Jan Sibelius and Shostakovich, it is hard not to see where the symphony was going, from simply being a kind of collection of pieces -- basically a divertimento -- with an allegro and presto at the beginning and the end. The symphony starts to take on dramatic structure that happens with Ludwig van Beethoven. After that there was Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Anton Bruckner, and so forth -- and don't forget Hector Berlioz, and then into Mahler. I think that Shostakovich becomes the latter-day example of the symphony. We have the American Symphonists, too, with Peter Mennin, William Schuman, Roy Harris, and so on. Then there are the English and German Symphonists, with Boris Blacher, Paul Hindemith.... On one hand, you have the invention of new-music ensembles that starts with Schoenberg, but you also have the continuation of the idea of the symphony, in which one can ask, "Is it a symphony?" "Well, it can be anything that I want it to be!" Can it have 12 movements? Yes. Can it have soloists? Yes. Can it have a text? Yes. Can it have an idea? Yes. I made it a point of not calling my fifth symphony an oratorio, and not calling it a quasi-religious work. I thought of it not in the tradition of Haydn's *Creation*, but more in the tradition of the modern symphonist that begins with Mahler. My *Symphony No. 2* is really heading in that direction. It was the first time that I clearly saw that my symphonic work was going to elide very much in the lineage of the modern symphony, which comes from Haydn, Shostakovich, and beyond -- and I would be part of the beyond.

I thought of *Symphony No. 2* as a one-movement piece, in sections. *No. 1* is in 6 movements, *No. 2* in 1, *No. 3* in 4, and *No. 5* in 12.

D'ALIMONTE: Symphonic writing suggests certain formal models. Do models matter? If so, what about the opening movements of your *Symphony No. 2* beginning with a theme and variations? What does the term "symphony" mean to you?

GLASS: A symphony is a container, and I can put in it what I want to, and that is what is interesting. I think "symphony" is a label that is convenient, because it alerts programmers that such a piece has a certain level of ambition in terms of content, length, and form. The name is an immediate allusion, so that when you say "symphony," a tradition is brought to mind that takes itself fairly seriously in terms of intention. Whether "symphony" has to do with David Bowie or not, there is no question that the *Low Symphony* has a serious arc to it. So, I think the message is that, when people program something called a "symphony," they would put it on a program of symphonic music of one kind or other.

D'ALIMONTE: For the future, where do you see the symphony as a genre heading, and how do you see your symphonies fitting into this setting? From a music-history viewpoint, how do you, if possible see your symphonies in the grand scheme.

GLASS: I don't know where the symphony is headed, but I am currently working on another symphony now which is based on a poem of Allen Ginsberg called *Plutoni Mode* and I don't know how many parts it will be but it will be for one soprano and orchestra. It is really going back to that early 20th-century idea of combining the song with the orchestra. I've written songs for orchestra, but this is not going to be a song, it will be a symphony.

D'ALIMONTE: You wrote in the CD notes for *Symphony No. 2* that, "What you hear depends on how you focus your ear, how a listener's perception of tonality can vary in the fashion of an optical illusion." I hear this movement as fluctuating in and out of E minor and A minor.

GLASS: I am more interested in tonality as a function of perception than as a horizontal stacking of tonalities, which is what was found in the 30's and 40's in the music of Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud. Wholly formed tonalities were pitched or played against each other -- for example, in the beginning of Honegger's fifth symphony or in Milhaud's string quartets. The point is that you can analyze them as complete tonalities that are pitted against or played together simultaneously. I am less interested in that than the ambiguity of tonality. This has a lot to do with the function of tonality being really viewed as an activity of perception and not as something that has an inherent function on its own. That is an essential facet of a truly postmodern way of looking. It really comes out of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage -- the idea that pieces don't have a coherent existence, but that they function as an occasion of the activity of perception. When John Cage says that there is never any balance, what he means is that what you're hearing becomes the music. There is no content that is independent of perception. This is a crucial and a fundamental idea of postmodernist thinking.

That is what makes the difference between 19th-century thinking and the present. I think people mistakenly think that pieces are new- or old-fashioned because they use tonality or don't use tonality; of course, that's nonsense. We fully explored tonality and atonality by the middle of the 20th century, obviously. Tonality itself was no longer an issue. The real issue was the perception of tonality. When we shifted our work to look at it that way, then other things began to happen.

Among Europeans, this is a very hard idea to grasp, because they were so tied into an ideological idea of consonance and dissonance and tonality and atonality that they had a very hard time thinking about how one actually listens to music. Many Americans ran into trouble with Europeans because Europeans simply didn't get it... and to this day, they still don't get it, they still haven't figured it out. In fact, if you look at it, there is still so much American art which is really about perception, whether it is Jasper Johns, Richard Serra, William Burroughs, or Allen Ginsberg -- it is filled with this notion that content is impacted by perception and that content doesn't exist independently of perception, in that you have to take the two of them together. When we look at it that way, we can say that's how I'm looking at tonality.

That is what I am interested in thinking about. Other people say this piece is in this key or the harmony doesn't change -- the most foolish things you can imagine that people say; as if they suddenly had their brains stop functioning or something... it is amazing. Rigid thinking has to do with being trained to think in an academic way that tonality is a concrete thing. I think in 10 or 20 years, the importance of perception will be common knowledge. Many of us have been living with the idea for a long time, since the 60's. The people who have been working with the concept have been thinking about it.

D'ALIMONTE: Your symphonic music, beginning with the *Low Symphony*, is a fusion of "high" and "low" art. Were you consciously aware of making your music more accessible to a wider audience base?

GLASS: For sure, absolutely. Basically, I always have been a popular composer. I never thought of myself as an avant-garde composer. My difficulty was that it took so long for me to find the audience. In fact, my audiences began with audiences of 15-20. Starting in 1968-69, it took almost 12 years to begin to get audience in the hundreds and thousands. The audience built slowly, but now it is quite a big audience. But there was never a question in my mind that I was writing for people who are living today. I wasn't writing for people who weren't born yet. I couldn't see why the people who weren't born were better than the people who were already here. I just don't get it -- I mean, why should I write for people who are going to be alive in 50 years when I've got real ones right in front of me? Besides which, I feel that the people who aren't born yet are going to be as fallible as the people that are alive today; they aren't going to be fundamentally different.

Basically, I don't believe that there is such a thing as history to begin with. I think that is another idea which we really have to abolish. There is no such thing as the judgment of history. It is an absurd idea; it simply doesn't exist; it is something we make up. Therefore, when you look at it that way, I am looking in terms of music that exists in terms of the world I'm in. That is the only world I know. I don't know about this other history world. I don't know about the future history; I don't know about the past history. What I really know is that I am out doing 60-70 concerts a year; I am writing music; and other people are playing music of mine, and that's what's really happening. My fifth symphony was premiered in New York to approximately 6,000 people over three nights, each night virtually sold out. These are not bad numbers.

Some people take a position that it is a big worry when other people like the music. On the other hand, W.A. Mozart's *The Magic Flute* was immensely popular. Giuseppe Verdi was a very popular composer. Stravinsky, I remember in my own lifetime, was a very popular composer. I don't know that popularity is a sign of deficient quality, when I look at music from that point of view. Many times, music reviewers criticize the audience for sitting there listening to the music! The critics are not able to write about the music, so they focus on what the audience is doing. The point is that we're talking about populism, and that my music is always directed at the public and it never occurred to me that there was anything wrong with that. My only difficulty was that I was 41 before I could make a living doing that. I spent a lot of years doing day jobs, while I was writing this music and playing for very small numbers of people. My music career was a rather gradual development.

I am getting more performances of my work now. There is a big shift and more and more concerts are happening. I spend a lot of time with young composers trying to help them get their music played. There are "collectives" now in New York. I go to these concerts and I do see people there -- about 100 or 200 people, a smallish concert. But I went to hear *Bang on a Can* at BAM and there were at least 1,000 people in the audience. There was no one on those programs that a subscriber to the NY Phil would recognize. The concert went on for 10 or 12 hours and though the audience changed, there were always lots of people there. So, one needs to think that something is going on.

D'ALIMONTE: How do you view the work of the French neoclassicists, and what is their influence on you?

GLASS: I knew Milhaud, as I studied with him at Aspen, in 1960, and I quite like him. I was in Paris in the early 60's and I studied with Nadia Boulanger, who was a student of Fauré, who was student of Franck. I always like the music and the whole school of French composers, really. Composers at a certain time divided themselves either into the ones who went to study to study in the German-speaking countries or in France. You either went to Berlin or Vienna, or to Paris. If you went to Austria, you would study 12-tone music, or if you went to Paris, you would study with Boulanger or Messiaen.

I was attracted to the French school; I liked the music, but by that time, it had already lost its freshness for me. When I was younger and as a student at Juilliard, the French music was interesting to me.

D'ALIMONTE: Did you ever study with Messiaen?

GLASS: I went to one of his classes, but I didn't think very much of it, really. I like his music, but my impression was that he was not a very good teacher. Many people disagreed with me and they liked him very much. I just didn't think that he was a very disciplined teacher, whereas Boulanger was super disciplined. As she studied with Fauré, I hear that harmony from his music all the time and I am sure that Fauré's music got to me through her because of Nadia's studying with him.

D'ALIMONTE: Do you feel that with your symphonic writing that you've been able to shake the term "minimalism," or do you no longer care?

GLASS: It is a good term, but it applies to such a limited time. Music after 1975, the term doesn't work any more. If you told people that you were playing a minimalist symphony and you play *Symphony No. 2*, they would say, "What do you mean?" It is clearly not working in reductive style. It is working in an expansive style. The term "minimalism" was good for about ten years. Almost everyone stopped doing it, except for a few people. La Monte Young and Steve Reich continued, but almost everyone else stopped.

I got involved in the theater and with the theater, you're talking about a form where you add things. It is not a reductive form but an additive form. You're putting together text and image and you're looking for something that is much more expansive. The real reductive music for me was *Music in Twelve Parts*. By 1976, I was writing *Einstein on the Beach*, and, after that, I wrote about 15 other operas, about 30 ballets and about 18 movie scores. I was involved with other modalities -- things that involved text and image and movement and music -- together with collaboration with other artists. To talk about that as minimalist work is an absurdity. However, I think the thing that you have to remember is that the word, to being with, was invented by a journalist. There was never a minimalist magazine as there was a *Die Reihe* (*The Row*), there was never a school along the lines of Darmstadt. Minimalism was never an institutionalized movement the way the European serialists institutionalized themselves.

To begin with, the idea was a journalistic conception that had no real basis in practice. It was basically what an editor was trying to find in a shorthand way to tell his readers. The writers were the real minimalists; they were real reductionists, because they were trying to take a fairly complicated social and artistic milieu and reduce it to something very simple-minded. The reality didn't work that way. The things that were interesting about the so-called "minimalists" were that their differences were much more interesting than their similarities.

Frederic Rzewski and David Behrman and Meredith Monk and Steve Reich were all called minimalists and what do they have to do with each other? Not very much.

What I don't like about the word is that it is inherently misleading. I think the job of the writer is to try to elucidate and try to clarify things for a general public, but to add confusion onto confusion, simply because it makes it easier, is heresy. It's like the story in Plato's time, when a philosophical faction arrived and was trying to describe a human being as a featherless biped. One day, someone plucked a chicken and threw it over the walls of the academy... there was their featherless biped! One can get into this kind of absurdity because of the shortcuts of naming... but what do you have? You end up with a chicken! So what is the value of using such a description?!

Concert Reviews

9th Other

KEN BULLOCK

9th Other Minds Festival. March 5, Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA.

The Ninth *Other Minds Festival of New Music* opened March 5 at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts under a pall.

Composer Lou Harrison, a guiding spirit of the Festival whose compositions had been featured at both the second and eighth Festivals (the last his 85th birthday celebration), had died suddenly, barely weeks before, at a restaurant in Indiana on the road to a celebration of his music in Columbus, Ohio.

Harrison was the latest of the figures of the heroic period of American (and of West Coast) compositional music, that began with Charles Ives (whose work Harrison helped draw attention to) and Henry Cowell (whose student Harrison was) in the first years of the 20th century, to pass on -- last year's Festival ended with a musical salute to Leo Ornstein, whose death at over 100 had just been announced.

Besides the confident breadth and deep humanism of his music, much has -- and will -- be said about Harrison's humanity, so evident that recently a New Yorker reviewer confessed that, even though he'd never met Harrison, that he'd long thought of him simply as Lou. The festival program featured a few memories: Harrison responding to an admirer's "I love your music!" with a hearty "Me too!" -- or to a student's smoking skull "Buy or Die" T-shirt with, "Actually I don't mind if they die if they don't buy my records." Perhaps most poignant was composer Charles Shere's memory of Harrison's reply to him asking what Harrison thought we were here for: "We're here to entertain one another with stories, on our common way to the grave."

Lou Harrison not only recommended Ned Rorem's music to Other Minds, he had convinced Rorem to leave New York for the Festival, to break his post-9/11 vow not to travel again. The anticipated reunion at the Djerassi ranch and the festival was replaced by a memorial that increased the elegiac mood of Rorem's extensive song cycle that opened the concerts, *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1997), the title taken from Hebrews, 11:1 (with epitaphs from Corinthians and Poe's *Poetic Principle*), 36 songs, settings of poems and prose excerpts, ranging from William Penn and John Woolman through Walt Whitman, Baudelaire and the Brownings, Auden and Paul Goodman, to poems of the contemporary state of the human condition, of poverty, of helplessness, of AIDS and denial.

Going from Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* ("Henceforth I ask not good fortune -- I myself/am good fortune.") in *Beginnings*, to Jane Kenyon's *The Sick Wife* ("Not yet fifty,/she had learned what it's like/not to be able to button a button.") in *Middles* to the *Ends* of William Penn's "Death then, being the Way and the Condition of Life, we cannot love to live, if we cannot bear to die . . .," Rorem's venture celebrated the scope of Lou Harrison's answer to Charles Shere's query.

Rorem's music constitutes a kind of anomaly in a country with no real tradition of art song or lieder--as performance, much less as composition. The very settings that Other Minds Artistic/Executive Director Charles Amirkhonian calls both "ravishing" in their harmonic treatment and "meshed seamlessly," vocal to piano line -- magnifying the texts, yet with clarity, not ornament -- worked very well for an audience at an event keyed more to the vocal experiments of Partch or Ashley. Anomaly alone would have given the song cycle a place here, but the accomplishment of setting together 36 texts of such different idioms and moods -- and of different orders of accomplishment themselves -- dramatized by the interplay of solos, duets, trios and quartets of two sopranos, a mezzo, a tenor and two baritones -- held for the whole evening.

Rorem, in his original notes for the piece, mentions that "the challenge [is] less musical than dramatic words by authors who never asked to be musicalized . . . intended for a cycle rather than a single song . . .there must be a sense . . . of inevitability in their sequence, because the same song in a different context takes on new meaning . . . Non-vocal music is never literal, can never be proven to 'mean' anything . . . Since words speak louder than music, but since music , precisely because of its meaninglessness, can heighten or even change the sense of words, I try, in word-settings, to avoid the conventions . . .[that] ascribe specific meaning to ambiguous sound . . ." This triumph of dissociated sensibility carried the evening, focussing attention on the relation of parts within the whole, capturing the movement of sublimity in a way that parallels Augustine's assertions about the repetition of a poem from memory in *The Confessions*: "What happens in the poem as a whole happens too in each syllable & verse. And it's also true of the greater activity of which the poem is but a part, and of the particular fate of a man, made up of many actions, and that of Mankind, made up of many particular destinies."

Evidence of Things Not Seen was performed effectively by singers and pianists from the San Francisco Opera Center, though one young composer (and singer, who has performed works by Rorem) was heard to complain that the singers' voices suffered too much from that professional syndrome peculiar to those who aspire to the larger houses : loudness and sameness.

The program ended with a kind of epilogue to Rorem's elegiac mood : a memorial for Lou Harrison, his vocal piece *King David's Lament for Jonathan* (II Samuel 1:26 : "Now I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan . . ."), dating from 1941, revised for chorus in 1985 and arranged by Christi Denton for tenor (Harold Gray Meers of the SF Opera Center), four-handed piano and the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, conducted by Kathleen McGuire--and joined by the audience "after the third time through . . .".

The vocal outpouring of the first night in a way set the theme for the whole festival : the voice, or voices, predominated in many of the performances, voices and rhythms. The second night's program -- perhaps the most satisfying program as a whole for many in the audience -- began with the remarkable *Four Studies of Peking Opera* (for piano and string quartet) by Ge Gan-ru, voicings for a chamber group of European instruments, of rhythmic, sung, spoken and gestural aspects of that art form whose cousin, Cantonese Opera, can be heard during practice just by strolling at night through San Francisco's Chinatown.

Ge comments that "The first movement evokes the unique percussive timbres and rhythms which typically accompany the gestures of . . . performers on stage . . . accentuat[ing] . . . gestures and underscor[ing] . . . individual roles . . . the second movement celebrates . . . aria singing . . . a single line of music develops and expands through layers of variations into a complex texture . . . in the third movement, the instruments imitate the singers' spoken narratives . . . as essential . . . as arias to Western operas [and] far more melodic than we are accustomed to in English [because of the four-tone system of . . . Chinese . . .]. The last movement . . . in rondo . . . employs quickly accelerating rhythmic patterns . . . typical of Peking Opera."

He also noted, "While in Western music, composers are deeply concerned with the relationships between pitches, in Chinese music what is important is the particular pitch and its microtonal and timbral character." (There's a dovetail with some of Cage's remarks about the identity of a tone . . .) "I try to combine contemporary Western compositional techniques with my Chinese and experience along with Chinese musical characteristics inherited from thousands of years ago, so as to set up a universal music world expressing natural and primitive beauty."

Amy Neuberg -- best-known to some in the audience from her performances with Robert Ashley's opera ensemble, as well as her own group, Amy X. Neuberg and Men -- appeared as a peppy soloist, performing her own *Six Little Stains* -- or, more accurately, fronting an ensemble of live electronic gadgets producing unusual interactive rhythms that teased her unique vocalizing into provocative patterns and funny skirmishes--not a cycle, but individual works which, as she notes, "means you're allowed to clap after each one."

Evelyn Glennie brought the night to a close with a solo percussion recital of pieces by Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic and Askeell Masson for snare drum, and by Toshimitsu Tanaka, Zivkovic, and Leigh Howard Stevens for marimba. Glennie, riding high on a wave of acclaim and recognition (she has played often in the Bay Area), was only limited in the sense that she was not able to show the range of her mastery of percussion instruments. That perhaps only increased the intensity of her performance on the two she could bring to the Palace of Fine Arts auditorium (the acoustics of which she had expressed a dislike for). She displays her uniqueness --and the niche she has carved out -- in every performance, though none can quite reflect her broad knowledge and sophistication.

The third evening had a more problematic edge : programming (and staging) problems detracted from the possible merits of the first and last pieces. Daniel Lentz's *Cafe Desire*, performed by the Phoenix Bach Choir (who premiered it last year) and the Other Minds Ensemble on keyboards, strolling violin, wine glasses and virtual orchestra (bagpipe, harmonica, conch, etc.) and two solo "karaoke" voices, had an intriguing post-minimalist sound, unfortunately muffled by an uncontrolled synaesthetic staging that oozed kitsch -- from singles bar ambiance, to karaoke, to cliché lyrics projected as huge supertitles on florid backgrounds of light. This kitschy tastelessness in the production values distracted a good part of the audience from what was in some ways a surprisingly tasteful musical piece. Lentz personally is very capable of putting on the credible as well as the snobbish, and perhaps the last word on the whole spectacle was spoken by his friend, San Francisco artist Dan Max, who called *Cafe Desire* "the Douglas Sirk film of the Festival."

At the other end of the evening, bassist William Parker's *Spirit Catcher* suffered the same fate that Pauline Oliveros' Circle Trio (practitioners of her Deep Listening improvisation) did last year: placed at the end of the program and forced to rush off to beat the deadline to close the Palace, Parker's ensemble (of familiar faces from SF's free jazz scene: stalwart woodwind man Pelikan Chalto, reedsman Oluyemi Thomas and voicewoman Ijeoma Thomas of Positive Knowledge, and flugelhorn player Barbara Sandidge) could barely warm up as a group, their intertwining sounds rendered tentative by the big stage and flies overhead. Parker's piece for pre-recorded sound and free improvisation, featuring the Indian bowed dilruba (four metal, 24 sympathetic strings) and Moroccan sentir, besides Parker's celebrated bass playing and spoken word, seemed intriguing -- but deserved better scheduling and maybe a more intimate venue.

In between the Lentz and Parker performances was a gem: two pieces by New Zealand composer Jack Body. Another one recruited by Lou Harrison, Body's major work has remarkable range, introducing, especially, rhythms and counter-rhythms from various Asian music (including Maori) into the context of Western symphonic orchestration. He is a rigorous teacher and field researcher, ranging from Madagascar to New Guinea, recording and notating much instrumental and vocal music. Lacking an orchestra, his contributions to *Other Minds* reflect less this breadth and attention to minutiae than they do an accomplished and sophisticated -- even playful -- sensibility. Sarah Cahill played the three movements of his 1996 piano piece, *Sarajevo* -- a worthy contribution to last century's piano repertoire, of which it displayed great familiarity. The first movement, "Remembering . . . imperfectly" drew his comment : " . . . based on the idea of 'selective memory,' . . . I have created a quasi-folksong (played with the right hand thumb) with a kind of plucked instrument accompaniment. The melody re-cycles round and round, always in fragmentary form, each time with different sections 'erased.' Flourishes and ppp staccato chords provide a background, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ominous. The movement is static, time suspended before the storm." For *Totentanz*, Body says he not only had Liszt's piece for piano and orchestra in mind, but Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* as well -- and Albrecht Durer's famous image, *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. For *Lachrymae*, the final movement, Body remarks that it is "a lament, but like much of the traditional music of the Balkans, without self-pity, as much in anger as sorrow." The resultant sense was one of recognition--with a slight surprise: much was familiar, but the approach was somewhat different, refreshing . . . not the usual, officially (or personal, sentimentally) generated elegy for the catastrophes of recent history.

Three Sentimental Songs, on the other hand, proved to be the charmer of the whole festival. Written in 2000-01 for piano (Sarah Cahill again) and percussion trio, Body's sometimes whimsical reminiscences of tunes (from "an old community songbook") he remembers his grandmother singing while he accompanied her on piano, had affinity with Ives' treatment of popular songs--or even of some of Satie's canniest "irritating" pieces, where the best-known motifs become overt gestures or are analyzed for almost rococo improvisation. The three old songs -- "Daisy Bell" (a.k.a "Bicycle Built For Two"), "All Through The Night," and "Little Brown Jug" -- should be familiar enough, but when the audience was asked to join in on the refrain of "All Through The Night," the only ones who seemed to know the song in my section were two of us (who later established we shared a common Welsh Mormon ancestry -- but that we knew "Little Brown Jug" too!).

The final night brought the festival full circle--or maybe inside-out -- with two performances back-to-back that in some ways define the antipodes of the *Other Minds* mission. Stephan Micus opened, unaccompanied, playing his remarkable array of instruments from around the world, and singing in his peculiar style that defies description as, exactly, melismatic -- but employ "words" that "do not carry any known meaning."

Entitled On A Silent Wing, his selection of older and recent compositions featured a number of unpublished experiments with single and double reed instruments, featuring the Armenian double-reed bass duduk (and Micus had lessons from the celebrated Djivan Gasparian, whose recordings introduced the instrument to an international audience), combined with shakuhachi and other reed and string instruments -- including kalimba and sinding-- as well as pre-recorded sounds, to express that "sound in my mind that would include the breath of the wind, the screams of human beings, the space of the desert and the sea, and the pure light of snow mountains."

Micus, who reminded one listener of "one of those 19th century German traveler-explorers," clearly is a little hard to place in the constellation of *Other Minds* musicians. Not an improviser or folk or popular musician, and not a composer of contemporary music in the same sense as the others whose works have graced the festival, he seems to be working in the same fields as those who are normally labeled with the consumer captions "world music" or "new age," yet strives for something more rarified and sophisticated, and is more skillful and unique than all but the finest musicians wearing those blazons. He succeeds in those arenas, too, giving pleasure through music that evokes, provokes meditation, relaxation, festivity, and primitive emotions in the fullest meaning of that term. It was interesting to hear the gossip from the Djerrasi ranch that, though at first Micus and Ge Gan-ru had been a bit reserved toward each other (Micus, the international adventurer on ethnic instruments, and Ge, the Chinese composer who never composes Chinese music, per se, for Chinese instruments), they later had become rather friendly. His set was, as he would seem to have wanted it, a floating, almost anomalous intermission in the parade of compositional music and improvisers -- the exception that proves the rule?

Stephen Scott's exceptionally accomplished piece, *Paisajes Audibles (Audible Landscapes)*, and his Bowed Piano Ensemble -- with splendid soprano Victoria Hansen -- and Amy Scott's remarkable video projection of the proceedings (that from inside, around and about the piano often reminded one of *Dr. Tulp's Anatomy Class* -- a true theater of action).

This is the first major piece in Scott's 25-year project of the bowed piano to combine his hybrid instrument (or medium, as Scott himself more accurately refers to it) with voice -- and, like Ned Rorem, he chose poetry and unusual prose (belles-lettres, that forgotten category?) as text: poems by Pedro Perdomo Acedo and Garcia Lorca (as well as a satiric verse in French by Scott) and prose by Plato and Verner Reed, as well as Agustin Espinosa's *Lancelot 28'-7'* (about the "Homerized" Arturian Knight of the Cart arriving from Brittany on Lanzarote, easternmost of the Canaries, "natural habitat" of the *Audible Landscapes*, where Scott premiered the piece in full last October at the *Visual Music Festival*, to whose founder, Ildefonso Aguilar, the work is dedicated to, jointly with Charles Amirkhanian.

Poet and music programmer David Gitin commented, "Stephen Scott is solid, grounded in minimalism, jazz, and various traditional music as well as classical music -- and is familiar with poetry as well, classical and modern. He has a definite vision." A vision so definite that a quarter century of research can pay off with a piece that goes beyond any preconceptions of the experimental and seamlessly combine elements from various media and traditions without the sense of post-modernist debt (or guilt) to any, but only that of an exploration expanding on its sources. Almost a century after Henry Cowell opened up and strummed, plucked and swept his hand over his "string piano," evoking the Celtic harp and Asiatic cithern, Scott's ensemble, armed with "nylon fishline, rubber tape, horsehair, guitar picks and fingernails, piano hammers, percussion mallets and specially designed piano mutes," turning at times from their collective instrumentalizing to sing in chorus, has gone beyond the prepared piano, the 'deconstructed' instrument' in a musical spectacle that follows "Harry Partch's dictum that 'the eye explains to the ear and the ear fulfills the vision' and, starting from the corpus of the piano itself (as real a medium and subject as the music and texts--and as much a haven as the westerly islands sung about, real and imaginary), ventures over earth-bound landscapes of the Old World, sweeping out past land's end, into uncharted Ocean.

Well-Dressed, Descending a Staircase

MARK ALBURGER

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, in Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* and Mosolov's *Iron Foundry*. September 3, Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Surreally enough, it was the substitute finale for Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Perhaps the performance by the San Francisco Symphony had been too smokin', but when the strobe lights flashed madly and the mechanized voice came on -- "There is a fire emergency reported in the building, please leave immediately" (no melting clocks) -- the 2003 Opening Gala Concert (September 3) was definitely over.

We were sitting in fine seats for a performance, but quite possibly the worst in Davies Hall for the surprise engagement -- front row of second tier, which meant walking up before walking down. While visions of 9/11 smoke-plumed stairwells clouded our minds, one had to reflect that there would be worse ways to go.

Michael Tilson Thomas had again lead a triumphant occasion -- the Stravinsky had been in top flight, from the gravely sinuous basic opening to the plangently luminous bassoonish Berceuse, with a romp through the diabolical Prince Kaschai music that was (presciently) downright alarming.

Ironically, the concert would have been over, were it not for Thomas's capricious last-minute program addition of his clearly wacky favorite: the Socialist realism of Mosolov's *Iron Foundry*, which bumps and grinds through howling ostinati and six heroically ascending horns.

But it was the Stravinsky *Firebird* that lingered, as we trudged slowly and orderly down the emergency stairwell to the echoes of sirens. Someone nearby expressed regret that the Finale had not been heard, so we spontaneously broke out into the music, like latter-day Titanic refugees.

Talk about your glorious false alarm, which it proved to be, as we stepped out into the cool night air. An expensive (emotionally for the audience and financially for the backers) and memorable evening.

Dessert and Dinner

MARK ALBURGER

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, in Ned Rorem's *Sunday Morning* and Aaron Copland's *Piano Concerto*. September 10, Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA

The opening of the San Francisco Symphony season at Davies Hall can be a banquet reversed. After the bon-bons of the Gala, the entree cooked up by Michael Tilson Thomas on the September 10 subscription concert featured recipes of Ned Rorem and Aaron Copland. It was a sumptuous repast, indeed.

Rorem's *Sunday Morning* is an eight-movement feast of color and technique -- a peck of Stravinsky, a dash of atonality, all on a bed of neoclassicism. The inspiration was the same-named poem by Wallace Stevens; the ingredients include a brusque descending nine-note pattern that is handled in traditional modernist fashion as a unifying base. There are bubbling strings, a steam of fluttery flutes and piccolo, a buttery battery of 7/4 poundings from timpani and trumpets, and an ascending taffy pull of two violas -- all of which sound better than they would probably taste.

Taste was the question of the premiere way back when for the Copland "Piano Concerto" -- was it in good? This 1926 example of "symphonic jazz" originally caused a stir. And it still tickles the palette more than three-quarters of a century later, when served up by the impish and dexterous Jeffrey Kahane, who was the energetic and enthusiastic soloists. The work shows Copland in an earlier populist mood -- urban and urbane, rather than Great Plains plain. And the chunky, clanky, and cranky two-movement composition (particularly from chefs Kahane and Thomas) is still a wow.

A Mother of All Operas

MARK ALBURGER

San Francisco Opera in Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* (libretto by Gertrude Stein). War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, CA.

I want to tell, I want to tell -- oh hell. I want to tell, oh hell, I want to tell about the San Francisco Opera. And did they present "The Mother of Us All"? Yes, they did. And is the music by Virgil Thomson and the libretto by Gertrude Stein? Yes, it is

How was it then? It was very good, I want to tell about the opera

Pamela Rosenberg programmed it as the gala opening (September 6, with performances through 26). And it was, for an opener, a very daring move. Crazy set was designed by Allen Moyer, which featured stacks of books piled impossibly high, a high wallpapered wall with hidden doors and windows, an all-American schoolroom/courthouse with a giant lecturn and practical chalkboards, and a forbidding foreboding snowman

And were the singers in fine voice? Yes they were, with a fabulous Luana DeVol as Susan B. Anthony, ably supported by Stephanie Novacek, as her loyal partner Anne. Beau Palmer and Judith Christin soared as Gertrude S. and Virgil T. (yes, the composer and librettist appear as characters in this dizzy work) -- and looked the parts, too. A booming Jeffrey Wells made a resounding and imposing Daniel Webster, high on the lecturn, with fine patter work from the comic duo of Jeffrey Lentz and Troy Cook as Jo the Loiterer and Chris the Citizen. Beth Clayton made for a sympathetic Indiana Elliot, while her bad-guy brother had his day as portrayed by Ethan Herschenfeld. Angel More was literally portrayed as an angel -- wings and all -- as a varied portrait from Anna Christy; and John Duykers and Wendy Hill checked in as the tuneful couple John Adams and Constance Fletcher. Katherine Roher, Dana Beth Miller, and Oren Gradus all made memorable contributions as Isabel Wentworth, Lillian Russell, and Ulysses S. Grant, and it went on and on: a cornucopia of historical and contemporary characters as a festival of semi-coherent Americana

And somehow it all made sense. Thomson's musical thievery from the hymnal, the Mother Goose primer, patriotic marches, etc, etc, were all ably realized by Donald Runnicles and the San Francisco Opera Orchestra -- give or take a few stray notes, and a good time was had by all, which included more composers in the audience than usually seen in an entire season. So hats off to director Pamela and company for a telling event

Clearly a Rosenberg is a Rosenberg is a Rosenberg -- she makes the SF Opera a there there.

Chronicle

September 20

Aretha Franklin. Radio City Music Hall, New York, NY.

September 7

Death of Warren Zevon (b. 1/24/47, Chicago, IL), of lung cancer, at 56. Los Angeles, CA. "Zevon had a pulp-fiction imagination that yielded songs like 'Werewolves of London,' 'Poor, Poor Pitiful Me,' 'Lawyers, Guns and Money,' and 'I'll Sleep When I'm Dead.' . . . His piano songs suggested marches, hymns and the harmonies of Aaron Copland, while his guitar songs connected rock, Celtic and country music. Mr. Zevon made his last album, *The Wind* (Artemis), knowing that his time was running out. In August 2002, a week after deciding to record a new album, Mr. Zevon felt chest pains while exercising and eventually went to see a doctor for the first time in 20 years. A lifelong smoker, Mr. Zevon was told that he had mesothelioma, a cancer that had advanced too far for treatment, and that he had only a few months to live. He chose to work on the album, completed it and lived to see it released this year, on Aug. 26. In an interview in 2002, he said the diagnosis had led to 'the intensest creative period of my life. Mr. Zevon was prized by other songwriters. Bob Dylan performed his songs onstage, and Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, Emmylou Harris, Ry Cooder, Dwight Yoakam, Tom Petty and Don Henley all appeared on *The Wind*. . . . His father . . . was a Russian-Jewish gambler; his mother was a Mormon and often in fragile health. Mr. Zevon studied classical piano, idolizing composers like Stravinsky and Copland, and picked up guitar as a teenager" [Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, 9/9/03].

September 12

Opening of Zankel Hall, in a program conducted by John Adams. New York, NY. "A bracing program" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 9/15/03].

Death of Johnny Cash (b. J.R. Cash, 2/26/32, Kingsland, AR), at 71. Nashville, TN. "His best-known songs include 'I Walk the Line,' 'Folsom Prison Blues,' 'I Still Miss Someone,' 'The Ballad of Ira Hayes,' 'A Boy Named Sue' and 'Ring of Fire.' . . . The middle initial [of his name], Cash would explain throughout his life, 'didn't stand for anything.' . . . 'Folsom Prison Blues' . . . [was written] by Cash . . . in Germany after seeing a film about inmates at the penitentiary" [James Sullivan, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7/13/03].

September 14

Frederic Rzewski and Meredith Monk. Zankel Hall, New York, NY.

September 18

Christophe Eschenbach conducts the Philadelphia Orchestra in the premiere of Gerald Levinson's *Avatar*. Kimmel Center, Philadelphia, PA.

Items

Things couldn't be worse for composers, and they're getting even worse by the minute. Nobody in America, and by extension in the world, knows what a composer is, period. Even cultivated educated people in America who might know all about literature old and new like Dante and Philip Roth, and they might know all about painting old and new from Michelangelo to Jackson Pollock, but even if they know Vivaldi if you say music they assume you're talking about rock music or pop music. And people like me and by brothers and sisters aren't even a despised minority, because for something to be despised it has to exist.

We're also the only century in history in which the past is more important than the present in music. Everything being done at Lincoln Center now is the same old thing -- Beethoven, Bach, Brahms -- not even Debussy or French music. The big stars now are performers. Itzhak Perlman, who lives across the street from me, makes in one night what I make in a year. Music now is the interpretation of standard classics, not the creation of new works. I think music is in a very very bad way.

Ned Rorem, in an interview with Charles Amirkhania
San Francisco Chronicle, 9/10/03

Writers

MARK ALBURGER is an eclectic American composer of postminimal, postpopular, and postcomedic sensibilities. He is Editor-Publisher of 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, an award-winning ASCAP composer of concert music published by New Music, oboist, pianist, vocalist, recording artist, musicologist, author, and music critic. His *Diocletian* will be performed in late January by College of Marin Contemporary Opera.

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NANCIA D'ALIMONTE pursued Doctoral studies in orchestral conducting at the Eastman School of Music, where she had the opportunity to conduct the Eastman School Symphony Orchestra and perform the Rochester premiere of Philip Glass's *Symphony No. 2*.