

# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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NOVEMBER 2004

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# Varoom!: An Interview with Kenji Bunch

MARK ALBURGER

New York composer Kenji Bunch blasted into the San Francisco Bay Area with his Symphony No. 1 ("Lichtenstein Triptych"), based on pop-art panels by the great Roy, as heard from Alasdair Neale and the Marin Symphony on November 10.

I rang up Kenji Bunch at his Brooklyn residence on November 4.

ALBURGER: So what's it like, Kenji?

BUNCH: The first movement, "Varoom!" is a big explosion, the second is called "We Rose Up Slowly" -- a picture of lovers embracing underwater -- and the third is "In the Car" -- we see another couple in an out-of-control vehicle.

ALBURGER: I'm guessing a fast-slow-fast scenario.

BUNCH: Yes!

ALBURGER: What drew you to a first-movement explosion?

BUNCH: What intrigued me about painting (more so than, for instance, an airplane one with military overtones), and what I love about it is we see this big colorful boom! on the canvas, and we don't know how it got there. Is it a good thing or bad thing? I love the ambiguity! I wanted to write music that sort of suggests what this explosion could be and what might happen before and after. So the music is all about big buildups and climaxes and denouements.

ALBURGER: So there are several big bangs?

BUNCH: Yes, there's a big bang right at the beginning and several more. The whole movement is very unstable, full of augmented chords -- I even devised an augmented tone row for the piece!

ALBURGER: Would you consider yourself a 12-tone or post-serial composer?

BUNCH: Not really, but I like to use fresh pitches, so sometimes it means coming up with a row.

ALBURGER: Can you define your sound world?

BUNCH: Sure. I'm pretty eclectic. I feel lucky to be working at a pretty interesting time. After the 20th-century there are so many interesting camps. Everything is pretty much up for grabs stylistically. At this point I have all sorts of styles from which to draw. Why limit myself? I like to pick and choose and create my own palette.

ALBURGER: Whom do you listen to in your spare time?

BUNCH: That's a good question! A lot of Johnny Cash and Stevie Wonder right now. And bluegrass, since I play fiddle. As for composers--

ALBURGER: Do you mean classically-oriented composers?

BUNCH: Yes! I love Osvaldo Golijov's music, and I've always been a fan of John Adams. But when I'm working I don't listen to much music at all, I've got my own music stuck in my head, I don't want to get distracted.

ALBURGER: Sort of like Charles Ives and Meredith Monk.

BUNCH: Yes! But for some reason I've been on a Motown kick -- its amazing stuff! Some of that style works for this piece, since a lot of the language is.... Well, I'm writing in a cartoon sound world., since Lichtenstein was so stylized. This whole piece has become a tribute to the Warner Brothers cartoon composer Carl Stalling and also the film music of Bernard Hermann. Also, there's more than a little bit in it of Leonard Bernstein, who really captured a certain essence....He figured out a really good way to translate jazz idioms for orchestra.

ALBURGER: Would the works of Michael Daugherty have any correlation?

BUNCH: I guess his approach would be a good comparison. I certainly enjoy the vision in his work. I really was inspired by some program notes of his *Le Tombeau de Liberace* and that Elvis piece.

ALBURGER: The bassoon piece *Dead Elvis*?

BUNCH: Yes!

ALBURGER: So you've been inspired as much, or more, by Daugherty's program notes as musical notes. That sounds like a parallel with John Cage, where many were said to be more informed by his philosophy than his music.

BUNCH: Yes, the philosophy -- the thought processes behind the music!

ALBURGER: So, what about the second movement of the symphony. Are there tunes?

BUNCH: I guess there's a tune in there. It's a very sentimental and nostalgic piece -- rather Mahlerian.

ALBURGER: As opposed to malarian?

BUNCH: Yes, Gustav Mahler, in this case. I really enjoyed writing about this painting; I found the image really touching: this couple kissing and sinking under water, or maybe they're rising up. It's a transcendent state -- a liebestod.

ALBURGER: So, do you evoke Richard Wagner?

BUNCH: Yes, I couldn't resist a Tristan chord. Wagner's music was around the house when I was growing up; my mom loved to listen to it, so it became tucked in my brain somewhere. Using Wagner in this context made sense -- a couple so involved with one another that they don't want the world to intrude, even in their demise. The image is a tenuous moment, so the music is an example of hyper-romanticism! But I didn't want it to be cynical, I didn't want to make fun of the moment. There's something sincere in Lichtenstein's work: he's embracing these vernacular images; he's recontextualizing and displaying as hard as he can and saying this can be beautiful. I don't like the cynical use of popular music. I don't like the "hey it's funny to have pop tunes in the concert hall" approach. I wanted to show where I believe Lichtenstein was coming from in his so-called pop art. I wanted to show the sincerity in the music without melodrama.

ALBURGER: Hyper-romanticism, yet no melodrama?

BUNCH: Well, there is melodrama, but it's ok -- not too cheesy! I was committed to working in a stylized sound world.

ALBURGER: Have you heard John Adams's "Sentimental and Naive Music," which would seem to fit into some of these concerns?

BUNCH: I want to hear it. I hope I can meet John Adams while I'm out here.

ALBURGER: Maybe we'll have to bomb in on him together! Speaking of fast actions, what about that third movement?

BUNCH: It's perpetual motion -- the music of passengers in a car who have very little or no control over their situation. There's also something mysterious in the Lichtenstein painting. And I wanted excitement and adventure in it as well.

ALBURGER: Were you influenced by the Adams *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*?

BUNCH: Yeah, I love *Short Ride*, but I really wasn't thinking about it.

ALBURGER: There have been more trains than cars in musical depictions, probably because of the former's longer existence. And of course, musical portraits go back at least to Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

BUNCH: It would be cool to have a whole program of musical pictures!

ALBURGER: Yes! But for now, we'll look forward to focussing on your Lichtenstein ones! Will the paintings be reproduced in the program booklet?

BUNCH: I just learned that they're going to be projected on a screen behind the orchestra, which will be great!

# Concert Reviews

## Making Loud Noises About Not Wanting to Be Serious

KEN BULLOCK

Goat Hall Productions *Fresh Voices V*: Program A. August 22, Thick House, San Francisco, CA. Through August 24.

In the program notes for *Fresh Voices V*, the festival of new music theater by Bay Area composers and librettists at San Francisco's Thick House, Artistic Director Harriet March Page of presenter Goat Hall Productions ("San Francisco's Cabaret Opera Company") remembers, "Last year, when the world seemed to be going crazy, I was making loud noises about not wanting to be serious..."

She asked for "commedia... circuses, clowns... absurd, surreal... puppets!" She got her wish with this year's programs. Anyone who still believes opera is unapproachable and stodgy -- or that its heyday was a century or two ago (and I know there are more than a few who do: I've also seen at least a few converted) -- should hie themselves to Potrero Hill. Like going to an amusement park, *Fresh Voices* is a rollercoaster of moods and movements and sounds -- one moment mysterious, the next hilarious... yet somehow all done with a light touch that gives this stylized form its true sense of youthful passion and excitement, with a sophisticated expression.

"What does it all mean? Who knows?" concludes Page, putting the emphasis back on the performers and the audience. There's more than sound and fury to the show, and it comes out through the curious intimacy that makes co-conspirators out of the singers and spectators of all these apparent formalities.

*Pericles* was the first piece of the first program, an original mixture of Thucydides, Plutarch, and Shakespeare.

Lisa Scola Prosek, the composer and (with Elena Scola) the librettist, remarked that "the music is a result of a year devoted to the study of Greek modal scales, after which I forgot it all and began writing the piece." Which perhaps accounts for its exquisite sense of balance, yet of white sounds, of waves -- all fleeting... a vague reminder of Satie as well as modern neoclassicism... but entirely on its own, with the composer at the keyboard, two brass, two woodwinds, and cello (including Eduard Prosek and three *Fresh Voices* composers -- and one more, Mark Alburger, conducting). The voices were fine: Aurelio Viscarro and Julia Ulehla as incestuous Persian royalty, and Marka Knight as a lugubriously ironic *Pericles*, exhorting his Athenian democratic empire to war (!) -- backed by an outstanding chorus of three, including Page.

Following *Pericles* was a "witty miniature comic opera" of mutual suspicions of adultery and a searing trial by fire: "Strike while the iron is hot!" A primitive polygraph -- leading to much laughter when the polymorphous perverse confessions begin to pour out. Michael A. Kimbell's music is *tres moderne*, all over the keyboard (Keisuke Nakagoshi, excellent throughout as accompanist for the latter three pieces of the evening). -- in, yes, witty contrast to Ross Halper's lyrics, tart and sassy rhymes (based on Meistersinger Hans Sachs's 16th-century play) -- as performed charmingly by Maggie Tenenbaum, Knight, and Brian Rosen.

Brian Holmes, composer-librettist of *Fun with Dick and Jane*, is a physics instructor at San Jose State, home to a great music department, where he also teaches "The physics of music." Accordingly, *Dick and Jane* is a parallel universe that most of us of a certain age have been caught up in. For all I know, it may be a remedial course in String Theory as well. Mock-heroics abound in a musical garden that alternately blossoms both puerile and almost Handelian. Dick (Frank Farris) bravely tries to subdue Spot (faithfully portrayed by the composer's son Jerry -- there's a technical term for this kind of cross-species casting of a relative besides "nepotism," but I can't locate it): "Please go away / Spot / I cannot play!" -- and Jane's aria "I see you" to Spot's gamboling through the audience. Sarah Hutchinson sings super head tones. Kate Offer sends chills up the spines of former schoolchildren as strict marm Mrs. Schmaltz. The composer (who dedicates his truly "virtuoso garden hose solo" -- a neglected instrument before Viv Stanshall's go on the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band's *Urban Spaceman* album with Paul McCartney as producer -- to "his first grade teacher, Mrs. Walsh of Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas." What would Saint-Saens say?) plays Mr. Holmes, and is seen skulking and chuckling in the foliage when not pounding the toy piano. Everybody is perfect, and it should play with Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein excerpts on *Captain Kangaroo* reruns. All this in 12 minutes -- or as the composer notes, "Though the opera is brief, its action spans four decades from the Eisenhower years to Clinton's first term. . . . The garden hose was made possible by a generous grant from Orchard Supply Hardware."

After intermission came the blockbuster (or its first half -- competed, along with three more originals on the weekend of the second program): Mark Alburger's exceptional staging of Tennessee Williams's tussle with *The Theatre of the Absurd*, *Camino Real* (and it was watching a KQED production of the earlier and shorter *Ten Blocks* on the *Camino Real* that was a factor in propelling this reviewer head first into the players' world).

With an extraordinary set of folding and step ladders (designed by the composer) on and around which the excellent cast (Alburger, Ken Berry, Sandy Castleberry, Karl Coryat, Jane Goldsmith, William Loney, Eileen Meredith, Suzanna Mizell, Dale Murphy, Page, Rosen, Julie Tesar, Natalie Wilson) sprawl, droop, and sometimes riot; with characters plucked out of context from literature (Don Quixote -- and Sancho Panza sung by the composer too -- Casanova, Margueite a.k.a. Camille, Baron de Charlus...), legend, and popular culture; with musical heads changing modularly from Berg to Bizet to Britten to ancient Chinese, all the way over to Glenn Miller, ragtime, and "Begin the Beguine," alternating a dreamy recollective sensibility with dramatic insistence; this bright, prolific composer has delivered a tour-de-force of adaptation that puts its finger on the meaning of its original, if in a different key.

Besides all else, Alburger frenetically portrays Kilroy -- Kilroy IS here!" -- the hapless legendary GI knight-errant, afraid of being a patsy (to get taken -- the primal American experience... and fear?), stumbling into the limbo of an allegorical banana republic of broken dreams... Alburger has to scramble more than Spot in *Dick and Jane*. This deserves a special decoration beyond Kilroy's unpawned Golden Gloves -- and Alburger's *Camino Real* should be on Broadway, or somewhere not too far Off...

The San Francisco Bay Area has several dozen opera companies and projects -- an almost unique oasis for sung drama. A few of these commission or present contemporary work. Only a few major companies anywhere do that at all. And Goat Hall's *Fresh Voices* stands out among the few -- a completely successful, totally entertaining artistic venture, operating on a surprisingly modest local scale.

## Words and Music

### MICHAEL MCDONAGH

Goat Hall Productions *Fresh Voices V*: Programs A and B. August 22, Thick House, San Francisco, CA. Through August 28.

Logic was never opera's strong suit, and Goat Hall Productions' *Fresh Voices V* certainly attested to that. Here the charm of illogic reigned. And how could it not when our daily lives seem just as dreamlike if not more so than anything onstage? Each of the seven pieces here was in some way stylized, which served to enhance and sometimes detract from their expressive intents. But it was also refreshing to see "San Francisco's Cabaret Opera Company" operating provisionally, at least, in a real theatre -- Thick Description's Thick House, which is actually quite thin. This venue has an ample, non-proscenium stage usually used for spoken theatre, a lighting system clearly visible above it, a section stage left, where the "pit band", though slightly recessed, is on the same level as the performers, and raked seating which gives everyone an equal bird's-eye view of the proceedings. It was so comfortable, in fact, that I almost felt I was at a plush movie theatre watching Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*.

The ancients staged their theatricals in similar, audience friendly layouts. And Lisa Scola Prosek's *Pericles* (ACT 1), inhabits that world by virtue of its time -- the 6th century BC -- and setting -- Athens and Persia. The composer, who, with her mother Elena Scola, adapted her text from Thucydides, Plutarch, and the Bard, prefaced it with a bare, opera seria-like overture both evocative and succinct. Marka Knight played the trouser, or in this case, tunic-with-armor role, of the Athenian politician. Her opening air, which had the pregnant line "Don't imagine that we fight for noble ends", was dispatched with power and authority, and director Harriet March Page had the inspired idea of having her address this directly to the audience, which stood in for the Athenian Assembly. Less successful was the back of the stage positioning of the chorus -- a vocally indisposed Page, Sarah Hutchison, and Kate Offer. And though the part-writing was probably fine, the liveness of the house seemed to mitigate against its full projection. But Aurelio Viscarro, who sang the part of the Persian king Axiochus -- it was written for the late Randall Powell -- was a knockout in his aria, which has the gravity of an 18th century scena; his subsequent trio with his daughter (Julia Ulehla) and Pericles was severe and poignant, too. Although the composer calls her opera "a comedy based on the commedia dell'arte tradition of Historic Theme," it was a far cry from her spirited but still serious *Satyricon*. Music director -- conductor Mark Alburger's brisk but not pushed tempos shaved about 3 minutes off the 35-minute score. Standouts in the six piece orchestra were hornist Brian Holmes, the composer-pianist -- especially her brief meditative solos -- and her trumpeter son Eduard, who played one melismatic section so well it seemed easy as pie, which I'm sure it wasn't



Comic relief was provided by Michael Kimbell's 16-minute *The Hot Iron* which had an all-in-rhyme book by Ross Halper adapted from a play by Hans Sachs. It also contained the evening's seeming homage to the 18th century, with bright opera buffa-like vocal lines underscored by the "orchestra" -- pianist Keisuke Nakagoshi -- which started with a broken chord. Maggie Tenenbaum (Wife), Knight (Auntie), and Brian Rosen (Husband) made a charming trio. Further mayhem ensued in Holmes's 12-minute *Fun with Dick and Jane* -- the redoubtable Nakagoshi again on piano. The composer's buffa was high-jacked by the insertion of a real aria da capo and a horn voluntary on a garden hose, which brought down the house. Page's direction was as witty as her four-person cast.

The most problematic piece on either program was Peter Josheff's 20-minute *Diary*, which is sad because it had some really beautiful lyric moments. But Josheff seemed hamstrung by Jaime Robles's book, which thought itself deep, but wasn't. Robles's sketchy story or non-story about two lovers, which may work on the page, didn't here. But who goes to the theatre for intention when experience is infinitely more seductive? Dean G. Loumbas's direction reminded me of Janes Bowles's *In the Summer House*, with a little James Agee thrown in. The performers struggled manfully with Robles' conceit -- Elisabeth Amisano overprojected as Woman, while Brian Rosen came off a little pulled in, as Man. The four-piece orchestra provided pertinent albeit sometimes neo-Copland sounds under Alburger's expert direction.

Sanford Dole's 20-minute *El Caballero* (Act 1, scene 1), to a book by Brad Erickson based on an O. Henry story, was a charming down Mexico-Texas way affair, with a tango at one point, and a text almost entirely in Spanish projected in supertitles at the back of the stage. Dole made an incongruously looming Cisco Kid, while the girl so gone on him, Tonia, was ably impersonated by Suzanna Mizell, who has the makings of a soubrette. Less convincing was Sandra Castleberry -- she played the self-conscious non-singing part of the dancer in *Diary*, though Page was wonderfully earth-mother as Lavandera, with Nakagoshi solid as ever on piano again.

Steven Clark's 14-minute *Californiaville!* was the most entertaining piece on either program, and in some ways the most fully realized. And although it's slight -- this ain't no heavy breathing Gesamtkunstwerk, but "an operatic farce depicting a rehearsal for a Western musical gone horribly wrong. Think *Annie Get Your Gun* meets *Waiting for Guffman*: it couldn't have been more stylishly delivered, and the contrast of musical styles hilarious and spot on.

It was hard to know what to make of Alburger's 85-minute setting of Tennessee Williams's 1953 play *Camino Real*, which was first staged at the Martin Beck in New York by Elia Kazan, with the assistance of choreographer Anna Sokolow, who worked so fruitfully with composer Alex North, and whose two sections spanned both programs. Williams's piece has always been seen as something of a failure, and the playwright, who constantly re-wrote it, admits as much in his highfalutin' preface to the first production, which reads like an apology. What, pray tell, are we to make of a script that conflates or rather confuses characters as disparate as Don Quixote and Proust's Baron de Charlus and others quite low born who commingle in a fever dream where nothing makes sense? Williams may have been attempting a kind of Anglo version of Lorca, without his lyric concision. But this is plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face America which doesn't take kindly to fancy -- just consider the unbelievable literalness, to say nothing of venom -- of the 2004 Republican Convention in New York to see what I mean. Alburger's musical analog to Williams mixed repetitive figures of unequal length a la Glass, and stamping chords a la Stravinsky with other effects, and some stick-in-your-ear tunes. The 14-member cast gave it their all, and Nakagoshi was the whole orchestra -- he's an amazing, but utterly modest musician -- again. And though the score is frequently frenetic, there were brief islands of calm. *Camino Real* lacked the concentrated focus and forward drive of Alburger's *Henry Miller in Brooklyn*, where the contrasts were always pointed. This piece sounded jam-packed but curiously diffuse. It also seemed as if it were teetering on the edge of discovering something really big. Which never arrived. And though that may well be its point, it didn't make for a satisfying musico-dramatic experience; still cast, and Alburger who directed, and played a pivotal part, gave it their all. *Fresh Voices 5* hung together more coherently than on previous incarnations, and talented performers, of which there are many in the Bay Area, got a chance to strut their stuff.

## Firebird Firedrill Finale

### MARK ALBURGER

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Bernard Herrmann's *Vertigo Suite*, Claude Debussy's *La Mer*, Aaron Copland's *Danzon Cubano*, and George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. September 8, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

It ain't over 'til it's over -- even if it takes a year. Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony finally dropped the other *Firebird* shoe at the September 8 Opening, by finishing up the Finale of the *Suite*, which was so rudely interrupted in last year's firedrill-interrupted Gala. As such, this beautiful Stravinsky work connected the events, as a shining example of clarity, energy, simplicity, and sophistication -- such that the entire current program seemed as a series of encores to the previous.

Bernard Herrmann's *Vertigo Suite* has many of the above Stravinskian qualities. But after a promisingly resounding opening it comes up a bit too simple and thin, before fuzzing out into more diffuse territory. None of these qualities are necessarily bad. They may be positive boons when allied to the strong drama of movies. And some film scores make great stand-alone works. But not all....

Diffuse is, of course, pretty much the order of the day when it comes to Claude Debussy, although nothing else in this composer's output is as demonstrative as *La Mer* ("*The Sea*"). Thomas put the orchestra through its swim formations in this demanding three-movement work, and a colorful, refractive time was had by all. Still, the mind can reel from all this aquatic turbulence, and its easy for one's attention to capsize or at least be swamped by the evocative textures.

No such "out-to-sea" lapses can be had during Aaron Copland's *Danzon Cubano*. Here the simple is pretty darn simple indeed, but in this hearing this listener finally realized that this simplicity is quite canny -- an artless "playing dumb" in the Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven tradition of limiting one's resources initially, only to demonstrate one's breadth down the road -- the Stravinsky dictum of "the more limitations, the more freedom!" This was a wonderful rendition of a work that turns out to have more to it than previously thought.

And in terms of reassessment and rehabilitation, few composers in the 20th century (and this gala was all post-1900, if not exactly adventurous -- yes, I still miss the commissioned-work-by-a-living-composer bit that was a feature of MTT's first three galas -- in his tenth year, have we settled into complacency?) have been as roundly censured and praised as George Gershwin (our third nice Jewish boy from New York on the program, Debussy being the odd Catholic Parisian out). His *American in Paris* remains one of his best works, not without flaws, but not without great tunes either, right up their with Stravinsky (and probably less often stolen). Thomas and the Symphony understand this music, and it made for a rousing finale.

## Composition and Performance

### MARK ALBURGER

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Steve Reich's *For strings, with winds and brass*, Jan Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2*, and Franz Schubert lieder, with Thomas Quasthoff. September 15, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

A painter paints and a writer writes, and we directly take in the results. But in much of the world's music the arts of composition and performance are distinctly different processes. Not always, of course. Many of the best composers were and are directly involved in the performances of their works.

But go to typical classical concert these days, and who gets top billing? The performer. Perhaps this is as it should be. Usually, we wouldn't be taking in the concert if not for the live artists onstage. On the other hand, if the compositions performed aren't worth hearing, we might not bother attending.

So the balance is a delicate one, and the big news at the San Francisco Symphony on September 15 was bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff, in his local premiere doing tried-and-true art songs by Franz Schubert, in interesting orchestrations by such unlikely later composers as Jacques Offenbach, Max Reger, and Anton Webern. Quasthoff has all the authority and command of a Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, a big sound made all the more remarkable by the challenges he faces as a victim of the thalidomide pregnancy years of the mid-last century. But the confident, mesmerizing demeanor and the rapturous voice are what stay with the listener, bringing to life such chestnuts as the galloping *Erl King*.

Other news on the program should have been a new work by Steve Reich, which instead turned out to be simply an unfamiliar title. "For strings, with winds and brass" is the first movement from *The Four Sections*, commissioned and premiered by the San Francisco Symphony way back in 1987. It's a fine work, though not on the short list of Reich groundbreakers, as the contrapuntally undulating strings and sustained winds harken back to earlier undertakings by the composer, many of whose best compositions involve him as performer as well.

Jan Sibelius's great *Symphony No. 2* remained the substantial masterwork on the program, an essay in composition trumping performance. The best renditions of this work are always stellar, and even workaday performances allow some of the brilliance to shine through.

## Mahler 9 Lives

### MARK ALBURGER

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*. September 29, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Hey, look at me! Listen to me! It takes a certain amount ofchutzpah to write an evening's entertainment. In the world of concert music, where programs traditionally consist of works by more than one composer, writing a long piece means squeezing any possible competitors off the program, so the music better be worth it.

In the case of Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*, it is. And with Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony recording live at Davies Hall on September 29, it was compellingly so.

Of course, Mahler was known for his marathon-length symphonies. But unlike some of his other program-busting oeuvres (the third and eighth come to mind), the ninth is not even sweetened by vocal fireworks. This is pure, sweet, tortured music -- period. From the man who said, "I am the universe resounding," after all.

This universe begins with gentle pulsations from low strings and horns (reused intriguingly by George Crumb in our own time) that warmly filled the hall (the irregular beats said to mirror Mahler's palpitating heart). In a movement that takes its time to unfold, every detail was lovingly in place, and the instrumental pallet shone through the languid atmosphere.

Even more arresting were the ensuing two scherzi, as different as peasant and poet. The first one bumped along in squattish bassoons and bumptious strings. The second is a feverish outpouring -- an explosion of three themes heard vacuum-packed in about three seconds, big-banged across that aforementioned universe. Many have explored similar notions in later music, but rarely to such successfully violent ends. Thomas and his alchemist accomplices captured some sort of Heisenberg Certainty amidst all the glorious musical chaos.

But certainly certainty is never possible, and the big question-mark that is the last movement, an elaboration of a turn, spun out in a deathly beauty that has often been said to be Mahler's own envoi to life. This was performance at its surreal best, and we look forward to a superb CD from this live recording with the San Francisco Symphony.

## Death and Sex

### MARK ALBURGER

San Francisco Opera presents the American premiere of György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*. October 29, War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, CA.

Death and sex.

That's pretty much it -- though not in that order, of course. György Ligeti's 1978 romp *Le Grand Macabre* finally received its American premiere on October 29 at the War Memorial, thanks to Pamela Rosenberg and the San Francisco Opera. It is an uneven work, with a slow, often gratuitous first act, but a stunning second that redeems the evening as a fully engaging one.

This was an Event -- capital E, almost on a par with the Grateful-Dead-meets-John-Cage extravaganza given a few years back by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony. But last Friday's searchlights out front and the suspicious number of dressed-up Halloweeners inside bespoke more than a bit of judicious pre-planning over spontaneity.

That same quality of high organization resulting in an illusion of the spontaneous might be a touchstone for the opera as a whole. By now, of course, this work by the great Hungarian-Austrian composer is hardly cutting edge. The bumps and grinds recall *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures*, the sustained, blocky choral textures *Requiem* and *Lux aeterna* -- music used to such grand effect and general notoriety in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

So it is not totally a surprise that we're dealing with a masterwork here. Yes, it has some of the foibles of its post-serial school: not many tunes, often hard on the ear, the first act in particular with not much music that you may want to listen to on a CD, devoid of the dramatic and visual impact.

But what a total impact! Unlike many works of this aesthetic, there is plenty of drama and humor here. And when the music is good, it is very, very good indeed. From the Monteverdian toccata-like overture of taxi horns, duck calls, and the like (structurally a palindrome, no less!), there is rarely a truly dull moment. If there are a few too many contrabassoon et al basso belches and *Lontano* super-Varesian high woodwind shrieks, so be it. Nevertheless, there are distorted horn fanfares (Monteverdi, again!), soaring Mozartean Queen-of-the-Night coloratura (nicely done by Caroline Stein in a sexy double-role as Venus/Gepopo), an amazingly arresting passacaglia based on a distorted take on the Beethoven "*Eroica*" pizzicato finale, and on and on.

Cast conspired throughout to make all truly first rate. Ligeti has been said to have been little pleased with many of the exclusively European productions thus far (no less than 35!). One only wonders what could possibly have lacked in this one (Alas, the composer was not in evidence). Sara Fulgoni and Anne-Sophie Duprels turned in highly stimulating performances as the sexually ambiguous, almost mummified Amando and Amanda (originally "Spermando" and "Clitoria"). Graham Clark (drunkard Piet the Pot) and Clive Bayley (skygazer Astradamors) were apt vocal foils for one another, with and without the full-bodied Susanne Resmark (dominatrix Mescalina). Gerald Thompson transcended gender and range in the heights of his countertenor as Prince Go-Go, and Willard White's deathly Nekrotzar basso was as stunning as his red mohawk (he's the necro czar, after all). The strong characteristic voices of John Duykers and Joshua Bloom (respectively the White and Black Politicians) were a delight.

Production Designer Steffen Aarfing found strong 911 and comic book connections (the locale is Breughelland, after all). Conductor Michael Boder kept it humming as much as he could. By the end, sure enough, it was nothing but death (maybe) and sex (possibly). But in existentialist tragi-comic fashion, a good time was had by all.

## 2 Redheads and 88 Solenoids

WILLIAM SUSMAN

Pianists Kathleen Supové and Sarah Cahill in *2 Redheads and 88 Solenoids*. November 3, Slavonic Cultural Center, San Francisco, CA.

The event on November 3 was billed as *2 Redheads and 88 Solenoids*, and it was hot! Typically, concerts are titled "A piano recital by ..." and then, the reviewer, if witty, will create a catchy headline. Well...no need here. The producers of this concert knew they had something special from the start and drove the point home. The two redheads were Kathleen Supové and Sarah Cahill and the 88 Solenoids described the electrical pickups used in the Diskklavier Grand Piano.

The Diskklavier, an invention of Yamaha, has been around since the 80's. It functions like a player piano but is triggered by MIDI instead of a piano roll. American maverick Conlon Nancarrow championed the use of the player piano in music compositions in the mid-20th century).

Produced by San Francisco composer Dan Becker, the program was nothing less than spectacular. The music was compelling and the performers totally engaged with the works at hand. Two brilliant pianists sharing the bill with composers from both coasts. Supové, from New York, performed *2 West Coasters* and *1 New Yorker*; and Sarah Cahill, from San Francisco, performed *2 New Yorkers* and *1 West Coaster*. Always looking for symmetry in all the wrong places, I liked this approach. And as this concert was the day after the election, there was some meaning in not having representation from middle America, or one might now say middle earth. Some may say coincidence, I say it was fixed!

The venue was the Slavonic Cultural Center off of Mission Street at Onandaga in San Francisco. With great acoustics and a new sound system, this venue is sure to be a popular spot for more classical concerts. The relaxed atmosphere of candle-lit tables, wine, and beer kicked off the evening to a great start.

Supové walked on stage with an eye-popping costume that one might see at an Exotic Erotic ball and proceeded to blow away the audience with a virtuosic score by Becker. An homage to the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., the composer's work *Revolution* (2004) combined prepared Diskklavier in duet with Supové against the back drop of King's prophetic words pumped through overhead loudspeakers. Repetitive pulsing, driving, and rhythmic lines with frequent key and density shifts made this composition appear much shorter than its actual time of 18 minutes. Becker announced the piece's time before the performance as a courtesy. After hearing it, I felt like I wanted more, which for me means he did something very right! How often do you hear a piece where you just go along for the ride?

Next was the viciously difficult work *American Berserk* (2001) by John Adams. One can see why this study was originally written for Garrick Ohlsson, who makes a living off of hundreds of Chopin and Rachmaninoff concerts, and has chops galore. Adams's six minutes of pounding polytonal octaves and fifths with jazzy syncopated rhythms was a tip-of-the-hat to Copland... on speed, and perhaps to the "berserk" concert demands and musical gifts of American fingerjocks such as Ohlsson. Supové proved her machisma, confidently executing chord after chord after chord after chord after chord...after chord after chord after chord after chord after chord...

Randall Woolf closed the first half of this delicious evening with his *Sutra Sutra* (2001), a stunning work mixing a text by Valeria Vasilevski, and very theatrical one: Supové talked to the audience as if giving a math lecture (this was intentional) while remixed- and processed-tabla tape loops fluttered in and out to lovely piano chords and rapid-fire single-note repetitions. One could tell that Supové was passionate about this work and it showed in her "discussion" of string theory and the "vibration of sound" juxtaposed with starvation and a symbolic loaf of bread perched on a music stand as a denouement to it all. It was odd to hear a grand piano (a relatively modern western instrument) in contrast with the tablas (a relatively ancient eastern instrument) and perhaps a metaphor for the co-mingling of modern western mathematics with Indian culture. The piece was 24 minutes long and it entertained throughout. I found myself smiling many times at Woolf's wit and Supové's keen delivery of text and music.

Whew! And now for the half-time show. Our emcee for the evening, Dan Becker, announced we'd be treated to some entr'acte music. It was time for my second beer, and as I leaned over to my friend I said "that was quite an onslaught of notes on the first half...I could use a dose of Satie"... No such luck. For around 15 minutes the Diskklavier (player piano) was set on auto-pilot with ditties that alternated between Kyle Gann's jazzy interpretations and Becker's *Bach ReInventions*, an homage to Nancarrow in a hyper-maniac state. This was the perfect background music for folks with Attention Deficit Syndrome. I gulped down another beer while tuning in, then out, then in... How many concerts have you been to lately where they challenge you even between sets? I like the performers' attitude.

Becker must have been reading my mind (as in... I need relief) because the second half opened with six beautiful *Private Dances* (2000-2004) by Kyle Gann. I leaned over to my friend again and said "Ahhh...Satie". I suddenly felt like I had been mercifully medicated, or maybe it was just another beer. These pieces were great and the third was a truly outstanding work of artistry. Imagine Bill Evans... late at night... alone... in his living room... with the lights off... ruminating at the piano...quasi rubato...with gentle chords and lyrical lines a la *Peace Piece* but never sticking to one static progression. Mr. Gann used harmonic language which is undeniably American stemming from the jazz vernacular. The piece was a *Gymnopedie* for the new millennium. I wanted to hear more. Cahill's performance made it appear like they were custom made for her technique as she played them with elegance and grace. Her round, lyrical tone was perfect for Gann's singing melodies.

And then there was *Mistica* (2003) by Tania Léon. It seemed a bit out of place in the company of such forward looking compositions, but Cahill's musicality made it fit in. The language of this work was much more in the mold of ivory tower academia... you know: the stuff that tends to win Pulitzers. Yet, I found this music to be incredibly romantic in gesture and Cahill's interpretation made it easily accessible and enjoyable. Léon attempted to infuse her *Mistica* with Danzon rhythms from Cuba without alluding to the harmonic language, and I caught an inkling of it from some unison two and three note clusters drummed out at the extreme low and high end of the keyboard a la Messiaen's *Ile de Feu*. I think that Cahill's delicate touch drew me into this flowing and colorful work. If you're going to use this somewhat dated language (that harkens back to the 1950's) to get your musical point across you, should say it with the beauty and style of Tania Léon and hopefully have Cahill as your interpreter.

To wind things up, Carl Stone introduced us to one of his favorite restaurants via *Sa Rit Gol* (1997, Stone names his pieces after his frequented eateries) for Diskklavier and pianist. This was a hard driving work that never let up. Rhythmically daunting, Cahill used a click to stay on track. With notes whizzing by all around her triggered by a remote laptop sequencer (rather than the onboard unit), and with a uniform strike velocity of 127 (that's the loudest in MIDI-ese), Cahill would interject chords and riffs creating a thrilling polyrhythmic effect against the already ingenious polymetric devices at play. I found it refreshing to listen to the subtlety of Ms. Cahill's rising and falling dynamics against the monolithic unrelenting hammering of the Diskklavier. This work was an original.

I rarely write about concerts but then again I rarely go to ones that inspire me. I hope to hear more from this crew in the near future.

## Composer Comparisons at Sacramento New Music Fest

### MARK ALBURGER

*Festival of New American Music: Bernard Rands.* November 5, State University, Sacramento, CA.

*Festival of New American Music: George Crumb.* November 6, State University, Sacramento, CA.

"Comparisons are odious," said Japhy Ryder, the Gary Snyder figure in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, but comparisons were inevitable in two evenings spotlighting the music of George Crumb and Bernard Rands at Sacramento State's 2004 Festival of New American Music. The back-to-back concerts in the Music Recital Hall on November 6 and 5 brought new perspective to two Pulitzer Prize-winning names, both in attendance.

Crumb is the more controversial of the two. He has been praised and denigrated over the years, but the work is unquestionably distinct, identifiable, and a major contribution to 20th and 21st-century music. If some of the once-innovative techniques are by now well-known, they were not as much so originally, and the compositions can still make a major impact on young ears and newly-rejuvenated ones, as evidenced by the brisk sales of Bridge Records' *Complete Crumb Edition* (Volumes 1-8 thus far) hawked in the lobby, with the composer in attendance providing autographs and good wishes.

This is not a phenomenon that always occurs at new music concerts -- an enthusiastic "book-signing event," rather than a "listen to your new music, it's good for you" attitude.

And with good reason. Crumb continues to amaze and delight. He is accessible without pandering, maintaining his integrity and humanity through a trajectory of decades. If he has been accused of "writing the same piece," so was Mahler. The crispness of his melodic and rhythmic motives and development recalls Stravinsky, as does his ability to transform found musics into his own (Ives also comes to mind, of course). Crumb's long work with Spanish texts in the Lorca cycle before returning to English mirrors Philip Glass's solfege, Sanskrit, and ancient Egyptian.

And lo and behold, in his later years, Crumb is actually embarking on a new stylistic period. Perhaps another parallel can be made with Edgar Varèse, whose productivity fell likewise in mid-career (indeed, in his case pretty much stopped), until new inspiration came his way. For Varèse it was new technology. For Crumb it seems a new take on life. If George seemed obsessed with death in middle age, he now appears to be merrily whistling in the dark in his later years.

Certainly there was always humor and vernacular in Crumb, but in more veiled contexts. Now in such works as *Eine Kleine Mitternachtsmusik (A Little Midnight Music)* (2002), played vibrantly by pianist Robert Shannon, the wit is right out there in front. While these subtitled *Ruminations on "Round Midnight"* by *Thelonious Monk* fit into Crumb's tradition of borrowed music, one cannot imagine this material being utilized in an earlier decade. J.S. Bach, Chopin, and Appalachian folk tunes, sure. But adding the bebopper to Wagner, R. Strauss, and Debussy here is both poignant and hilarious.

As Crumb himself would say in his West Virginia drawl, "Gosh." *Mundus Canis (A Dog's World)* (1998) took similar intriguing terms as five "Humoresques for Guitar and Percussion," inspired by five dogs in the composer's household over the years. Expert guitarist David Starobin was only slightly upstaged by Crumb's own quirky percussionism, limited to a few timbres per movement. The maracas recalled "Ghost Dance" from *Ancient Voices of Children*, the water gongs a take-your-pick from previous works. The pan drum made for nice counterpoint against the beating of the guitar body; the claves almost echoed an out-of-sync Steve Reich; and the final movement's guiro, castanets, and stentorian cries of "Yoda" (the last pet's name) were almost a parody of the "Christe" movement in *Makrokosmos, Volume I*. "Bad dog!" Crumb concludes, getting away with a belly laugh that he would not have dared earlier. He's old enough not to care; free enough to do whatever he wants; savvy enough to anticipate a joke on himself.

Lithe and dramatic (in the literal sense) soprano Tony Arnold was heard to marvelous and mysterious effects in the very early *Three Early Songs* (1947). How early? More than a decade before anything else Crumb has allowed to see in print -- the next work, *Five Pieces*, dates from 1962, so the 50's are an absolute wash. But even in '47, here is a youthful Crumb preoccupied by overtone drones, ostinato, sensuous soprano filigree, careful concern for clear melody and striking consonant-and-dissonant harmony. Arnold and Shannon's other collaboration, *Apparition* of 1979, just at the end of Crumb's most masterful decade, has never sounded better. Whatever mannerisms there be just might be good style by now. And that style is continuing in new directions, as suggested by the marvelous folk-song setting (a taste of Crumb's largest work to date) that concluded as an encore from all four performers.

Bernard Rands connects with Crumb in one of the three ambitious and impressive song cycles that comprise the *Canti Trilogy*, inspired by sun and moon and their eclipse, that being the *Canti Lunatici (Moon Songs)* (1980), sung in pure wonderful lunatic fashion by the beautiful and energetic soprano Janna Baty. Wild leaps and laughs, amplified whispers (but never, alas, amplified singing), sudden schizophrenic structural breaks all conspire to keep the listener rapt. Fine, if more measured, performances were also registered by tenor William Hite in *Canti del Sole* (1984) and bass Daniel Cole in *Canti dell'Eclisse* (1992), which served as bookends to the paradoxically hot-cool lunacy. Texts, in multiple languages, and emphasis on angularity, color, craft, texture, and individual word-painting over through-line put much of this solidly in a common-practice academic modernist camp -- a certain kind of excellence that has often won praise amongst peers.

The Boston Modern Orchestra Project, expertly conducted by a somewhat mannered Gil Rose (what about those third beats and pocket-glasses?), turned in top-notch performances throughout in a colorful yet spare presentation of flute, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, piano, percussion (massive amounts, almost always understated from two players), violin, viola, cello, and bass.

## Chronicle

September 8

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Bernard Herrmann's *Vertigo Suite*, Claude Debussy's *La Mer*, Aaron Copland's *Danzon Cubano*, and George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

September 15

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Steve Reich's *For strings, with winds and brass*, Jan Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2*, and Franz Schubert lieder, with Thomas Quasthoff. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

September 25

San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra in Mark Alburger's *Horn Concerto ("Sherlock")*, Anne Baldwin's *Migration*, Sondra Clark's *Homage to George Gershwin*, Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *Octet*, Steve Ettinger's *Mirabai Castle*, Owen Lee's *Fast and Light Through the Range of Light*, Ken Takara's *King's Gambit*, and Dale Victorine's *Overture*. Art Center, Palo Alto, CA.

September 26

DVC Philharmonic in Philip Glass's *Funeral of Amenhotep* from *Akhnaten*, Jerry Garcia's *Friend of the Devil*, Gustav Holst's *Mars* from *The Planets*, Howard Shore's *Gollum's Song* from *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Igor Stravinsky's *Infernal Dance* from *The Firebird*, John Williams's *Hedwig's Theme* from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Performing Arts Center, Diablo Valley College, Pleasant Hill, CA.

September 29

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*. September 29, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

## Writers

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MICHAEL MCDONAGH is a San Francisco-based poet and writer on the arts who has done two poem/picture books with artist Gary Bukovnik, *Before I Forget* (1991) and *Once* (1997), the former being in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, The Berkeley Art Museum, and the New York Public Library. He has also published poems in journals including *Mirage*, and written two theatre pieces -- *Touch and Go*, for three performers, which was staged at Venue 9 in 1998; and *Sight Unseen*, for solo performer. His critical pieces have appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Review of Books, 3 Penny Review, California Printmaker, Antiques and Fine Art, The Advocate, High Performance, and In Tune. He writes for The Bay Area Reporter and heads the Bay Area chapter of The Duke Ellington Society. He co-hosted nine radio shows on KUSF with Tony Gualtieri with whom he now shares a classical-music review website -- [www.msu.edu/user/gualtie3](http://www.msu.edu/user/gualtie3) -- which has also been translated into Russian and appears in Intellectual Forum.

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WILLIAM SUSMAN debuted at the Ravinia Festival when he was fifteen. He went on to study composition and piano at the University of Illinois. He accepted a graduate fellowship at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford and subsequently worked at IRCAM in Paris. His works have been widely performed both in the U.S. and Europe, including the Gaudeamus Festival, The Festival of Alicante, The Aspen Music Festival, The Festival of Microtonal Music and the Los Angeles Bach Festival. His commissions include The Fromm Music Foundation and numerous San Francisco and New York ensembles. His awards include ASCAP, BMI, Gaudeamus, Percussive Arts Society and KUCYNA. He also composes extensively for film and recently scored the independent feature, *Asphyxiating Uma*. A complete list of his works and film credits are at [www.susmanmusic.com](http://www.susmanmusic.com)