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Alexander Tsygankov, Virtuoso of the Domra

KEN BULLOCK

Listening to Alexander Tsygankov playing the domra--a three- or four-stringed Russian instrument, played with a pick, more ancient than the balalaika--accompanied by his long-time partner and wife, Inna Shevchenko, on piano, the overriding impression--besides that of a sound and dynamics more than a bit like the mandolin--is of the great cultural transparency of the music played, from whatever genre. Folk, popular, classical and modern techniques and aesthetics seem to exist together harmoniously, rather than in an artificial fusion of styles.

This seems to be a hallmark of Russian culture, at least since the achievements of the 18th century--before which, to adapt the irony of Dostoyevsky's eulogy of Pushkin, "there was no Russian culture, per se, only great moments in it"--and, in terms of official recognition and policy, Soviet and post-Soviet, "one of the--better!--results of the Revolution," according to writer Olga Andreyev Carlisle.

Tsygankov, who dates his musicality from "when I was singing 'Kalinka' while still in my crib" at age one, "was suddenly taken with the mandolin" at eight, listening to his grandfather playing simple folk tunes in rare moments of leisure from his position as principal of the college of topographical science in Orenburg, Siberia. "All at once, I desired to recreate those melodies myself. A month later, I began traveling from one Youth Pioneer camp to the next as a mandolinist, accompanied by an accordion, playing an array of popular tunes."

At 10, when his grandmother took him to music school back in his hometown of Omsk, also in Siberia, young Tsygankov found there were no courses in mandolin. He tried the three-stringed domra, which resembled a mandolin, after having been told of its antiquity: "I liked it very much, and tried it immediately; it took!" His teacher, Grigori Lanin, conducted a local balalaika orchestra; Tsygankov began sitting in on piccolo-domra. "Many pieces had domra solos; I got the chance to show myself as a soloist."

The Domra family ranges from prima domra, down through alto and tenor to bass. Round or oval-faced, the rounded backs are in five to nine sections. three-stringed domras are tuned in fourths; four-stringed domras in fifths, like a violin, excepting four-stringed bass domras, tuned in fourths.

Today, Tsygankov is virtuoso of the domra, and principal composer for his instrument, with three books of his compositions and transcriptions for domra. His work began with his transcriptions of pieces originally for violin and other stringed instruments, to expand what was then a meager repertoire for domra.

But first came long years of formal study. Tsygankov cites the "streamlined" system of Russian music education, introduced by the Rubenstein family in the late 19th century: first, five to seven years of music school, then four years of music college, followed by higher education at a conservatory or arts institute; finally, finally, post-graduate, or aspirantura, studies while on the institution's faculty..

Accepted into college, Tsygankov credits his teacher, Valentina Patrashova: "from my first year, she took me around to different competitions. When I won at one of them, my reward was to attend the Third International Tchaikovsky Competition. I watched the violin competition, and was impressed by Victor Tretyakov, who won first prize. It inspired me to work further in achieving perfection of my own technique."

When he began to win awards, Tsygankov received a letter from a teacher who'd earlier rejected him as a student, citing a lack of rhythm and poor pitch, asking if he was the same Tsygankov that seemed so unpromising!

Once, in his third year, after chorus practice, "I noticed the first-years piling out of their class. I was particularly struck with this one girl, Inna [from Ukraine], who studied piano with Ludmilla Winclair." Later both were accepted into the academy of the Gnessin State Pedagogical Institute--and began a lifelong collaboration, playing countless programs of duets, while pursuing their separate careers.

After more than 35 years of marriage, Tsygankov's particularly proud of the musicality of their two sons. The older, Eugeni, has been a balalaika player with the Osipov National Academic Orchestra for Folk Instruments. After graduating from music college, he studied computer science in the US, and now works as an information technologies specialist near St. Louis, making a trio with his parents in recitals in the Midwest. The younger son, Anton, majored in guitar at the State Art College of Jazz and Popular Music, and is now in his fourth year studying voice at the Institute of Contemporary Music, meanwhile writing songs and instrumental music and performing rock professionally, as well as winning guitar competitions, such as the Grand Prize in rock guitar at Moscow's Rosa Vetrov competition.

In his first year of academy, Tsygankov entered his first international competition, and was awarded first prize. In his fourth year, he auditioned for the Osipov Orchestra, and was made first domra under conductor Nicolai Kalinin.

In 2002, Kalinin would write, "I have personally known Alexander Tsygankov since 1967, when, as a freshman of the Gnesin Institute, he began his career in the Moscow Youth Orchestra of Folk Instruments under my direction ... Now, Tsygankov is the principal soloist and leader of the Osipov Orchestra, composer and teacher of the most prestigious academic establishment of Russia ... His decisive leadership in creating a school of professional performance of the domra ... is expressed in ... original compositions ... in which ... an organic union of technical complexity and artistic schema forge a spectacular sound which, before Tsygankov, did not exist, combined with the essence of pure folklore ... It became a fertile ground for generations of professional musicians."

In a long, successful career, Tsygankov cites several milestones, including his association with the Osipov Orchestra: in 1968: winning the medal in the Sofia (Bulgaria) International Competition of Young Musicians; placing first in the First All-Russian Competition of Folk Instrument Performers in 1972; the concerts with his wife, as soloist with Moskoncert and with chamber orchestras--and the state awards and honors: Distinguished Artist (1994), People's Artist (1998), The Kremlin-presented Order of Friendship for strengthening international cultural ties (2004)--and playing twice (in 2004) for President Putin in his dacha at Novo-Ogarevo, followed by conversations with the President. Inna Shevchenko has been awarded title as Honored Artist of Russia.

The range of what Tsygankov composes and transcribes, and what he and Shevchenko play in concert is wide; he believes that playing all genres from jazz to folk, in chamber groups to orchestras, is the only way to make the domra truly sing. The Bergische Morgenpost remarked that in classical pieces he's true to 19th century models and quotes Tsygankov saying, "I love the Romantic style."

But whether it's "Carnival In Venice," or his piece marking the anniversary of Shostakovich's death or a suite of Russian folk tunes followed by international popular songs, Tsygankov and Shevchenko play--and tour--with a stylistic verve, a sprightliness of sound and spirit.

(Three CDs of Tsygankov and Shevchenko's discography are readily available: "A Journey From St. Petersburg To Moscow," "Thirty Years Together," and "Round The World Journey." They're represented in the US by Haute Couture Entertainment: 510-717-3073) Although his diary was full right to the end of his life, when the end approached he was determined to return to his home in Siesta Key, Florida, to watch the sun set over the sea one last time. Having been granted a spectacular display of color, shortly before midnight he complained to his daughter that he was "frustrated and disappointed."

Concert Reviews

Pro Musica

DAVID CLEARY

Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston. December 1, 2002, Sanders Theatre, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Boston's Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra usually presents one opus of new music each concert. Their most recent event, however, devoted nearly half its duration to comparatively recent items. The result, while mixed, was worthy of a listen.

Earle Brown's *December 1952* is one of this composer's most conceptual selections. Written the same year as John Cage's seminal *4'33"*, it's a one-page score consisting of lines and filled-in rectangles of varied sizes, the whole perhaps most reminiscent of a Piet Mondrian painting. Realizing the work in performance is not easy; the version given by this group and conducted by Isaiah Jackson was as viable as anything else one may care to concoct. While the presentation had your reviewer wondering if the line from exuberance to disrespect may have been crossed on a couple of occasions, this was on the whole a pleasing five minutes spent.

Two items for piano solo and large mixed chamber grouping also appeared. *Aubade*, by Francis Poulenc, puts forth a significant amount of gravity in mood, helping to lend welcome contrast to the passages of Gallic urbanity one frequently encounters here and elsewhere in this tonemeister. While consisting of fragmented sections that contrast a good deal, the work holds together surprisingly well. Michael Daugherty's *Le Tombeau de Liberace* draws its source material from mid-20th century film scores and pop styles as well as such post-Romantic kitsch as Addinsell's *Warsaw Concerto*. Briefly put, it's tacky but sweet, perhaps not as campy and over-the-top as might be wished. But then again, this lack of sparkle may have emanated from the performance—the ensemble backing heard here sometimes seemed heavy and poorly balanced (the orchestra did a much better job with the Poulenc). Both piano soloists were excellent. Leslie Amper's conception of the *Aubade* boasted formidable finger technique that never lost sight of sonic buoyancy, while the demanding passage work in the Daugherty never once faltered in Randall Hodgkinson's capable hand.

Divine, Alive, and Kicking

DAVID CLEARY

Showings of Divine Love and Alive and Kicking: Carson Cooman. January 9, Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Carson Cooman's two previous annual organ recitals at Harvard University's Memorial Church were primarily concerned with presenting music by other composers. This latest installment saw this intrepid keyboardist devoting much of the program to one of his own pieces.

Cooman's *Showings of Divine Love* (2002), scored for organ and ambulatory viola, is a pensive meditation on the mystical writings of Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English recluse. With its austere, ritualistic feel, dissonant though tonally focused harmonies, ecclesiastic movement titles, sizeable duration, and leisurely unfolding, one can clearly note ties to Messiaen's oeuvre here. Textures are often simpler than those of the great French composer, though, and melodic material harkens back to Gregorian chant without indulging in quotation. Your reviewer tends not to like long-spun selections of this type, though the imaginative use of organ stops and overall melodic tautness (all material being derived from two ideas) were much appreciated.

The program's first half concerned itself with concise entries for solo organ. The best were *Panoply* (2002) by Daniel Pinkham and *Two Pieces for Organ* (2001) by James Luca Fournier. The former, roughly outlining an ABBA configuration, makes imaginative use of its opening upward linear gesture and boasts a vibrant, athletic feel that pleases much. Fournier's selection manages to be genial yet substantial, sweet-natured yet cheeky. Its opening movement, despite fast noodling textures and a clangorous sound world, speaks in a relaxed way, while the finale cleverly parodies dance and theatre organ idioms—a somewhat less outlandish answer, perhaps, to John Zorn's jump-cut fare. "Steal Away" from *Two Spirituals for Organ* (1997) by Joe Utterback and *Variations on "Amazing Grace"* (1985) by Gwyneth Walker provide variants on familiar melodies. Despite their brevity, there's much sonic contrast encountered, with Utterback's opus exhibiting distinct jazz influence and Walker's inhabiting neoclassic waters. Both are pleasant, if not exactly profound. With its uncluttered, block-like textures and stepwise voice leading, Anthony Cheung's *Villanelle* (2002) betrays its origin as a choral work. While translating to organ well enough, the music's amorphous structural sense and inconsistent harmonic language make for dubious listening. *Zampogna* (2002), by Sandra Gay, was the most tonally-oriented piece encountered. Built primarily from quasi-folk melodies embellished with drones and tinkling filigree, it's charming to the point of vacuousness and predictable in delineation of its rondo format.

Violist Marisa Green may be cited positively for her full-breathed tone quality on both modern and Baroque instruments; her intonation and linear shaping were a bit less than optimal, though. Cooman's playing, as always, was splendid, featuring excellent finger technique, careful delineation of voice, and inventive choice of stops.

The New Englander Connection

DAVID CLEARY

Boston Connection: Boston Modern Orchestra Project. January 18, 2003, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

When the thermometer reads 15 degrees Fahrenheit and falling, it takes precious little coaxing to find a reason to head indoors. A concert is always a good option in such cases. But the latest Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) presentation, given over to music by New England Conservatory faculty and students, would have been a great bet to attend even in weather that tempts one to remain *al fresco*.

Trans (1996) shows Lee Hyla writing for large forces while foregoing his favorite players, percussionists and bass clarinetists. But Hyla conjures up his usual powerful manner of speech without them. This is a tight, intense, three-movement fantasy on a trio of contrasting ideas, one each of a gruffly angular gesture, warmly melodic figure, and clutch of chords. Regardless of the mood or material, the music always delineates a well-contoured, memorable sense of line and idea. Also scored for chamber-sized orchestra, Michael Gandolfi's *Points of Departure* (1988) belongs to this composer's earlier dissonant Expressionist period. It demonstrates mastery of many writing approaches, ranging from fleecy elusiveness to athletic vigor to lovely warmth without sacrificing sonic consistency. Its scoring, while virtuosic, is never garish. And like the Hyla, it's motivically succinct and architecturally sound. *Fantasies Concertante* (2003) by Malcolm Peyton demands much larger forces than either of these two. Clangorous in sound while exhibiting tonal focus (enough so that triads and a quote from Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony can be accommodated), the piece is able to project a palpable playfulness while maintaining solid energy throughout. Its forms are convincing without being derivative. And its unfolding of material contains plenty of surprises while maintaining logical consistency.

This year's student contest winners held their own capably in the face of such formidable competition. *Abans* (2002), by Montserrat Torres, shows its young composer exploring more consonant waters, owing much in sound to Stravinsky and Copland. Hints of Iberian sunniness -- conveyed via use of indigenous percussion, jumpy rhythms, and piquant wind passages -- impart a unique flavor to the proceedings, though. There's also a delightful clarity of orchestration and a nicely expressed sense of melodic shape (primarily a *Bolero* upward wedge with many side alleyways explored). Violinist Rimma Yermosh, awarded first prize in the performer's side of the competition, gave a solid rendition of Alfred Schnittke's *Sonata for Violin and Chamber Orchestra* (1963-68). The work, while every bit as eccentric in progression and gesture as the rest of this composer's oeuvre, holds together surprisingly well, being ably structured and very consistent in its material. Yermosh, while not the possessor of a booming tone, always put forth a sturdy sound quality and exhibited the nimblest of digital and bow technique.

Conductor Gil Rose drew out a series of top-shelf performances from his charges. This is uniformly challenging stuff to play, and the orchestra never faltered. It's a pleasure to hear playing that is so accurate and exciting. And thanks to BMOP for providing the most welcome of refuges from the deep freeze outside.

Alea III

DAVID CLEARY

Alea III: Konstantinos Papakais: The Contemporary Piano. February 5, 2003, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Alea III concerts normally feature multi-person ensemble configurations, but their most recent outing showcased a single performer, pianist Konstantinos Papadakis. It proved to be a most enjoyable experience, one in which no one missed having a crowd on stage.

Synaphes, by Theodore Antoniou, lays its three building blocks out one by one in plainest view: thundering Lisztian octaves, fragile special effects, and introspective verticals. Antoniou then proceeds to craft an attractive entry by contrasting and developing these materials in carefully considered fashion. There's enough variety here to sustain interest without having arbitrariness creep in. Luigi Nono's only work for a solo pianist, *...sofferte onde serene...*, pairs its player with a tape recording that derives its material from keyboard sources. Though openly espousing the hyper-complex 1950's pointillist aesthetic of Boulez and Stockhausen, Nono's piece contains a tellingly bleak feel and enough sense of direction to keep the listener engaged. Regrettably, the tape part appears to have deteriorated enough over time that the composer's wish to have the sound worlds meld into a hard-to-tease-apart whole can no longer be effectively realized.

Gyorgy Ligeti's splendid *Etudes* have seemingly become the latest virtuoso mountain every pianist wishes to scale, and four of these appeared on the program. The final selection, *Makrokosmos I*, by George Crumb, is one of this composer's most successful numbers, able to transcend its scattered organizational milieu and sizeable duration to put forth a magically timeless, incantatory sense of self. A special performance is required to draw out the piece's unique charms, and Papadakis was up to the challenge. His sense of pacing was thoughtful without being flabby (never lingering needlessly), and his feel for color was exquisite. In short, this was one of the best performances of the work your reviewer can recall.

Papadakis's presentation of the Antoniou and Nono demonstrated excellent control of line and mood as well as an agreeably wide loudness range. Regrettably, these qualities served the Ligeti less well; his laudable resolve to inject plenty of dynamic contrast and touch shaping on these showy selections squelched their sparkle and focus a bit. But for the most part, this recital was a winner, showing Papadakis to be a top-shelf player. Clearly, he needed no help in carrying the weight of Alea III's reputation for first-class music making on his broad shoulders. Very much enjoyed.

Cohen Memorial

DAVID CLEARY

Memorial Concert for Edward Cohen. Slosberg Recital Hall, February 8, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.

Edward Cohen's death from cancer last year at age 61 is a loss still keenly felt by those on the local new music scene. This memorial concert, presenting four of his works composed within the last 25 years, was a fitting tribute.

Like most all his work, the *Piano Trio* (1992) utilizes a dissonant sonic palette, but surprisingly projects a strongly neoclassic slant on his earnest East Coast ethos. The outer movements, essentially a statement and variant version thereof, exhibit a hearty rhythmic regularity that in places echoes Stravinsky. These surround a weighty, somewhat craggy slow movement that manages to embed a paraphrase of the hymn tune "Rock of Ages" within its clangorous, yet flowing linear writing. Written two years later, the *Piano Sonata* is also cast in a three-part format, but the similarities between the two works end there. The *Sonata's* first and third movements are darker, more intense, than those of the trio. And the piano work's centerpiece unit, while wholly substantial, contains a goodly share of colorist writing that recalls Messiaen or Ravel -- not something one usually associates with Cohen's oeuvre.

The two vocal selections heard tonight, despite having different instrumentations and a time gap of twenty years in composition, show striking similarities. *Helen* (1997) for soprano and piano and *Elegy* (1977) for soprano and six players, both set 20th-century poetry that hearkens back to Classical subject matter, contain lengthy instrumental passages, and embrace an Atlantic-shore Expressionist sound universe. But the music is not a clone of Babbitt or Wuorinen -- Cohen's writing here demonstrates a smooth sense of line and distinctive, well-honed voice. Writing for the singer is both idiomatic and grateful, engaging at times in text-painting effects. Like all else heard this evening, these are intelligent and impeccably crafted selections that possess a clear, yet non-prescriptive formal sense.

Performances were excellent. Geoffrey Bursleson's presentation of the *Sonata* exhibited a well-controlled ear for color, natty digital technique, and a polished sense of melodic sculpting. Soprano Janet Brown sang the two vocal numbers with sturdy self-assurance, a richly substantial tone, and strong diction; instrumental backing was provided by pianist Yehudi Wyner and a sextet directed by Neal Hampton, which in both cases perfectly balanced expressive speech and subtle support. violinist Heidi Braun, cellist Lynn Nowels, and pianist Shuann Chai gave a forthright, nicely executed rendition of the *Trio*.

While Cohen has regrettably left us, his vital portfolio of music remains available today. This event proved an excellent place to sample some choice nuggets from that collection.

The Composers Voice

DAVID CLEARY

The Composers Series. February 19, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

A staple of Chinese restaurants is the dish chop suey, a wide-ranging melange of meats, vegetables, and other odds and ends into one menu option. The miracle, of course, is that it is not only edible, but delicious when prepared by an inspired chef. The most recent Composers' Series concert at the New England Conservatory laid out a preponderance of items that might be termed the musical equivalent.

John Heiss's aptly titled *Whimsies* (2001) for flute/piano duo is an aggregate of tiny vignettes that encompasses a dizzying variety of sound and approach, mingling such things as wind multiphonics and keyboard extended techniques with a harmonic language that demonstrates tonal focus without traditional progressions. But running through it all is a boatload of charm and gentle humor, making this unusual collection a delight to experience. And the work's overarching structural sense is loose, yet effective. Flutist Alicia DiDonato and pianist Alison d'Amato played it excellently.

Long-range architecture imparts particular distinction to the *Seven Etudes for Piano* (2002) of Robert Ceely. Its lush, openly triadic centerpiece is flanked respectively by items that are pattern-derived yet marginally tonal (respectively exploring tremolo and boogie-woogie textures), cluster-like yet more functionally focused (respectively concerned with fast alternations of black-and-white keys and flat-palm execution), and static while incorporating minute changes within an atonal framework (respectively fast, then slow in tempo). For the most part a gruff and flinty affair, it challenges the listener to discover an iconoclastic brand of beauty within its often uncompromising manner of speech. Shen Wen's presentation perfectly combined fire and accuracy.

Scored for flute and string trio, *Trackings* (2002), by Michael McLaughlin, uses an octave D and ostinato oriented writing as the anchors for a wild variation set that encompasses microtones, non-tonal idioms, and folk-like sound worlds. It proves a bit less successful, lacking the compositional savvy of many years' experience that helped bind together the varied tendrils of the Heiss and Ceely selections. Nevertheless, it shows this degree-candidate composer to have promise and a willingness to experiment that should stand him well in future outings. The presenting foursome of students struggled with intonation at times, but generally did well by it.

Compared to these works, Michael Gandolfi's trio *Cable Ready* (1996) was a model of consistency. Triadic and very much process oriented, this tripartite piece shows a love of popular music in its first movement's hi-hat and ride cymbal writing and its second movement's overt blues figuration (which nevertheless finds room to quote snatches from J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 4* and other entries). The work's outer entities brim with irresistible energy, surrounding a midsection that's sultry fun. Pianist Nina Ferrigno, cellist Rafael Popper-Keiser, and percussionist Robert Schulz gave it a terrifically committed performance.

While scattered and a bit eccentric, the evening's music provided toothsome, nourishing fare for the ears. Received with thanks.

Tsai! Tsai!

DAVID CLEARY

New Music by Boston University Alumni and Faculty. February 27, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

If this concert is any indication, pianist Daniel Schene is clearly not shy about mixing cutting-edge fare with traditional repertoire. The new works he gave were three in number, all written by Boston University faculty or alumni, complemented by music of Chopin and Debussy.

Originally composed for harp, *Fantasia* by Alex Kalogeras utilizes a hazy modal-based language a la Debussy and is loaded with gossamer pattern filigree and single note punctuations. But despite this, the work transfers surprisingly well for piano, not seeming at all a lazy transcription. And its layout, roughly a narrative curve format that incorporates plenty of intriguing wrinkles, is soundly expressed. In brief, it's an entity both lovely and sturdy, very much enjoyed. Samuel Headrick's *Aria and Invention* is drawn from a larger collection of such-named works by this composer. This particular coupling features a romantically florid opener (a fantasy on an aria from one of Headrick's operas) and an inversion canon demonstrating perky, polytonal neoclassicism. Both unfold attractively, avoiding any hints of preciousness—able listens both.

Sonata No. 2, "Elegy for September 11th," by Andrew List was the largest and most ambitious of the recent works heard. It also employed the most dissonant harmonic language, though was tonally focused enough to admit stacked perfect fourth material, octatonic scalar figurations, and jazzy upper tertian sonorities. While not entirely successful (the outer of its four movements pull their punches a bit and sometimes lack unflinchingly purposeful unfolding), there's much to commend here, especially in the humorous yet intense scherzo and the expressive slow movement and finale coda, the last two of which are warmly heartfelt without being maudlin.

Schene's playing put forth an astonishing variety of approach. His rendition of the Kalogeras and Headrick's "Aria" featured a marvelously deft touch, very tasteful and full of lovely timbres, including the perfect amount of pedal. The scherzo of List's sonata and Headrick's "Invention" were delightfully cheeky, benefiting from solidly enunciated finger work and a more brittle tone quality. And the first and last movements of the List showed that Schene can produce a big sound while still sporting clean technique. Impressive, and nicely done.

Boston Fleet Viva Chitra

DAVID CLEARY

FleetBoston Celebrity Series: Boston Musica Viva: Chitra. March 8, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA. Also March 9.

In a time of tension, it's reassuring to know that East and West can at least mingle successfully in the arts. Saturday evening's concert, presented by the FleetBoston Celebrity Series under their "Boston Marquee" banner and devoted to music by Shirish Korde, was tangible evidence of this.

Korde's one-act opera *Chitra* (2000) demonstrates strong influence of India and to a lesser extent Bali in its plot (concerning the amorous interplay between the title character, a tomboyish Hindu princess, and the demi-god Arjuna), scoring (Pierrot ensemble with added sitar and tablas), libretto (a polyglot of English, Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Balinese, and Kawi), staging (shadow puppets make frequent appearances), and musical mechanics (Indian Ragas and Kecak rhythms commonly occur). The harmonic language cleverly combines Eastern tonal foci with more dissonant Western idioms, while rhythmically one encounters everything from intricate metric changes to free notation. It all coheres wonderfully well, though. And *Chitra* is also effective drama, exhibiting taut stage pacing and a sweet sense of grace and whimsy that is irresistible.

Dancer Taya Ahmed's fiery, emotive portrayal of the title character was splendid. I Nyoman Catra, while not at all suggesting the physical attributes of a demi-god, gave agreeably raspy voice to the role of Arjuna, danced with subtly nuanced skill, and expertly participated in shadow puppet segments. As the narrator, soprano Elizabeth Keusch sang well, nicely navigating a part that, while not characteristically operatic, contained plenty of significant vocal challenges. Her secure high register singing was especially impressive. The costumes, designed by Kurt S. Hultgren, were both authentic and scrumptious. Less successful, though, was Ted Simpson's set, which clogged the stage with huge mushroom-like cloth trees and contained an odd backdrop as much suggestive of Henri Rousseau's paintings as anything genuinely Eastern. Director Lynn Kremer handled the interplay between puppetry and live dance quite well, and made as effective use of the claustrophobic stage area as possible. Performers from the Boston Musica Viva, excellently conducted by Richard Pittman, provided first-rate support.

Preceding this was a second Korde opus, a newly commissioned three-movement concerto for Balinese percussionists and chamber ensemble entitled *Blue Topang*. The interplay of occidental and oriental timbres was both expertly gauged and sonically beautiful, more than enough to override any formal looseness. Desak Made Suarti Laksmi and Bethany Collier played the solo parts wonderfully well, showing particularly able handling of intricate close canonic writing. Pittman and his Vivas backed up capably.

Verdant Equinox

DAVID CLEAR

Equinox Chamber Players in Concert for Impact. March 27, St. John's United Methodist Church, Watertown, MA.

The estimable Equinox Chamber Players, a wind quintet in St. Louis, came to the Boston area to give a series of presentations. This benefit concert for IMPACT, an organization devoted to providing safety training for youngsters and adults, was the last of these. Their program consisted of New Tonalist music by women composers based in New England.

Beth Denisch's two pieces added a percussionist to this standard fivesome. Originally scored for this configuration while adding in glass harmonica, *Jordan and the Dog Woman* is based on episodes from Jeannette Winterson's novel *Sexing the Cherry*. It obliquely references the sonic universes of Debussy, Stravinsky, and Copland while maintaining a viably cogent sense of self; pentatonic and blues-based material figure prominently in various parts of the work. The gestures and textures are simple without seeming insubstantial. In short, it's easy on the ears and most enjoyable. *Women, Power, and the Journey*, a piece commissioned by the quintet that celebrates four St. Louis women, is absolutely first-rate stuff. A bit more dissonantly neoclassic than *Jordan*, it puts forth very clear, cogent ideas and unfolds attractively without cloying. There's purposeful drive to this music, derived in part from the appropriation of African and pop idioms. In fact, the last movement, a tribute to Tina Turner, really rocks in a way that much similarly inspired downtown New York music does not. These wonderfully evocative character entries are simply splendid.

In contrast, Gwyneth Walker's *Braintree Quintet* proves too bucolic for its own good. Each of its five movements is a fantasia based on traditional Protestant hymns. The music, while certainly clever (one movement has the double reed players roaming the audience, crowing into their reeds in imitation of sheep gone astray), sadly comes off as syrupy and trite, inoffensive in the less good sense of the word.

Performances by the Equinox group (Cathy Lane, flute; Ann Homann, oboe; Jeanine York-Garesche, clarinet; Donita Bauer, bassoon; and Carole Lemire, horn) were excellent. A well-polished sense of ensemble blend, top-notch intonation, clean finger technique, and accomplished solo turns characterized their playing. Percussionist Henry Claude provided sturdy support throughout.

Ringling in the New Year

MARK ALBURGER

SF Sound. January 10, 2005, ODC Theatre, San Francisco, CA.

Sharing a program with John Cage, Anton Webern, and Anthony Braxton would be daunting enough to some; being the finale would be scarier still -- but David Bithell, in the premiere of his "Lumen" (2004), proved himself more than up to all tasks, with the most entertaining work of an excellent sfSoundsSeries concert at San Francisco's ODC Theater on January 10.

Bithell is a consummate composer-trumpeter whose imagination and humor never ceased to astonish in this three-movement music-theatre piece. In "Lumen Prelude," white-gloved vaudevillesque hands grasped the sides of two white screens in rhythm to an electronic score rich in drums and bells. A mock altar of two "ring for service" bells and a shrouded middle element appeared dead center between the screens, from which emerged oversized "point-fingers" on sticks somehow akin to Indonesian shadow puppets. The fingers found their targets in the bells, which set off multiple recorded ringings; the centerpiece was revealed to be yet merely another ringer.

Into this environment, in Samuel Beckettian picaresque fashion, is thrust the trumpet player, with two "trumpet assistants" (Matt Ingalls and Christopher Burns) alternately abetting and harassing a la the Beckett *Play* in such schtick as illumined editorial signs and a veritable *Waiting for Godot* hat trick involving fast hand passings of multiple mutes. Somehow in all of this Bithell got to play a few notes, which were either sound-processed or imaginatively complemented (or both) by electronic means. He also sneaks in a nice techno-sexual bit about mouthpiece and mute and horn and sonic vibration and animal-electronic magnetism.

A more virtuosic, traditional concert-like format ("Lumen Aria") brought the performer downstage right to a double microphone setup, whereupon the center stage was altered to become a throne-like array bedecked with protruding bell stands. "Lumen Finale" found the soloist seated amongst the bells, flanked by two female and two male performers on Javanese gamelan instruments. Rhythmic poundings from the gamelanists (one of several through-lines in the work) were met with repeated pitches in a hands-free trumpet setup, such that Bithell could simultaneously reach up and strike any bell in his contraption. No worries about changing pitch here -- one of the point-fingers reappears to depress a valve at a key moment. Meanwhile the two beautiful movement specialists (Pauline Jennings and Angelina Nicole) engaged in various serio-comic shadowplay, assisted in illusion by the trumpet valets, ultimately evolving into a brass-instrument-as-weapon and mute-as-bullet-image. It all ends with bells and mime and, despite its 50-minute running time, had very little downtime.

The rest of the concert engaged, too, if in more traditional non-traditional ways, opening with two classics in updated guises: Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (1939) and Webern's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (1913). The updating of the first was by the use of a notebook computer instead of records for the test-tones in this work for piano, percussion (mostly suspended cymbal), and electronic sounds -- simple elements elegantly performed by Christopher Jones, Russell Greenberg, and Burns. The Webern ("chamberized" by Jones as a quartet transcription for oboist Kyle Bruckmann, clarinetist Ingalls, Greenberg, and himself) was a nice practical reduction that could find its way on many programs, although one couldn't help but miss the colors of the chamber orchestra original. Nevertheless, Jones and the ensemble were able to preserve the fractured, halting beauty in this intriguing setting that often honored the original (preserving certain lines on oboe, clarinet, and percussion; transmuted a mandolin into a pizzicato piano) and sometimes contradicted it (sending a clarinet motive elsewhere when the clarinetist was busy covering a trumpet passage).

Anthony Braxton's nicely-named *Composition No. 341* (2004) was a veteran of the "Earle Brown *Available Forms* meets the Ornette Coleman *Free Jazz*" school of thought, a blow-your-heads-off thoughtful assault-and-battery (it wasn't all battery, after all) for a yes-yes nonet of apparently three trios: a mixed one of violinist Erik Ulman, trombonist Toyoji Tomita, and oboist / English hornist Bruckman; a duet-and-accompaniment of bass clarinetist Ingalls, alto saxophonist John Ingle, and pianist Jones; and a rhythm section of vibraphonist Greenberg, electric guitarist John Shiurba, and bassist David Arend. Like rebel Terry Rileys, they did their own thing -- sometimes together, sometimes not. The players would shift allegiances, signaling to new partners in crime on a semi-regular basis. If they didn't exactly steal the show, it was tour-de-force virtuosity nonetheless.

Singing for One's Celebration

MARK ALBURGER

Gala Celebration of Michael Tilson Thomas's 60th birthday, and his 10th year with the San Francisco Symphony. January 13, 2005, Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Happy Birthday! Now back to work. This would seem a harsh sentence; but when the work is fun, the fun is play, and the playing is by Michael Tilson Thomas (the birthday boy, at 60) and the San Francisco Symphony, the sentence becomes a celebration indeed.

Of course, it only sounded easy. It was still hard work, of course, but full of joy and the fullness of life. The January 13 gala celebration at Davies Hall was a second opening of the season, complete with conga drums and scantily-clad dances, opera and Broadway singers, and a potpourri of short selections that read like a Thomas Guide to Greatest Hits, tellingly, from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries -- no less than 13 featured composers, some with multiple selections, for a total of about 20 compositions. Wow!

Vocal pieces alternated with purely instrumental ones, the former including audience-favorite Frederica von Stade in Joseph Canteloube's lilting "Uno Jionto Postouro" and cuckoo "Lou Coucut" from *Chants d'Auvergne*. Thomas Hampson's handsome "Eri tu" from *Un ballo in maschera* of Giuseppe Verdi brought a new level of thoughtfulness to the music, while Renee Fleming found numerous nuances and beautiful wonders in Richard Strauss's *Morgen* and *Cacilie*. Audra McDonald, at ease in operatic and show-tune repertory, took a turn in the limelight latter with a miked "Mister Snow" from the Richard Rodgers *Carousel*.

The sans-vocals included a rousing "Polonaise" from Peter Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, the fiery "Farandole" from the Georges Bizet *L'Arlesienne*, a schizoid "Scherzo" as only Gustav Mahler could produce in his *Symphony No. 1*, and the fastest "getting down" on record for Aaron Copland's "Hoedown" from *Rodeo* (energy and humor were so much in evidence here, that premature clapping simply led to more artistic clowning). A recapitulation of the amusing MTT orchestration of "Promenade (Walking the Dog)," followed close on the leash by McDonald's lovely "A Little Bit in Love" from *Wonderful Town*, brought home the George Gershwin / Leonard Bernstein connections to the celebrant's own compositions.

Clearly Thomas is inspired to be the third composer in this trilogy, with references aplenty in his own finely-wrought, spirited, and sensitive music. As a microcosm of the vocal-instrumental alternation, MTT's songs brought back all the singers, plus the honey tones of Lisa Vroman, in a casual (at times a little too casual in several false starts from Fleming) shuffling of fully-orchestrated vs. composer-at-the-piano selections -- for vocal soloists and ensembles. There was also Mahler and Stravinsky in emotional qualities that cut to the heart yet remained serene.

And speaking of Igor Stravinsky, the bumptious *Scherzo a la Russe* received a reverse standing ovation -- that is, the players stood up on the last "leave-me-hanging" upbeat. And everyone could do no less in the flame-out finale that was Alberto Ginastera's *Estancia Malambo*. What a way to go -- everyone should have such a 60th!

And many more.

Authors

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, conductor, oboist, pianist, vocalist, recording artist, musicologist, theorist, author, and music critic

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DAVID CLEARY's music has been played throughout the U.S. and abroad, including performances at Tanglewood and by Alea II and Dinosaur Annex. A member of Composers in Red Sneaker, he has won many awards and grants, including the Harvey Gaul Contest, an Ella Lyman Cabot Trust Grant, and a MacDowell residence. He is a staff critic for The New Music Connoisseur and 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC. His article on composing careers is published by Gale Research and he has contributed CD reviews to the latest *All Music Guide to Rock*. His music appears on the Centaur and Vienna Modern Masters labels, and his bio may be found in many *Who's Who* books.

Chronicle

January 3

Work begins on NYC's biggest outdoor art project, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates*. Central Park, New York, NY.

January 6

New York Philharmonic in Béla Bartók's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY.

Pianist Janice Weber in William Bolcom's *Three Dance Portraits*, Frank Martin's *Eight Preludes*, and Leo Ornstein's *Sonata No. 4*. Goethe Institute, New York, NY. "Weber . . . [said] if conditions were ideal, you'd be drinking brandy and smoking cigars, and so would I.' . . . Dennis Russell Davies is captured [by Bolcom] in the mock-funereal *Dead Moth Tango*. Touches of ragtime and experimentation, suggested by a gentle knocking on the piano's frame, mingle in 'Knock-Stuck,' Mr. Bolcom's portrait of the composer Curtis Curtis-Smith. And Abba Begin, another conductor, is painted in lively, urbane Brazilian rhythms" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/8/05].

Philadelphia Orchestra in Luciano Berio's *Stanze*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. Berio's music was still on the ascent when he died two years ago at 77. *Stanze* -- five poems for solo voice, chorus and orchestra -- were his last pieces, and they shine with poise and quiet confidence. We are reminded that the possibilities of instrumental combinations are far from exhausted. . . . If Berio's music moves slowly, or sometimes not at all, there is activity within: textures swelling and contracting like lungs, woodwind colors swimming and undulating. So striking are the sounds that high drama is unnecessary [!]. . . . The music is colored by small flutters and shrieks; the chorus sings in almost conversational fragments and spurts. . . . Berio writes vocal lines that go in unusual, sometimes uncomfortable directions, but they have a naturalness of their own" [Bernard Holland, *NYT*, 1/20/05].

January 8

Off-Market Disklavier, with Pamela Z. Off-Market Theater, San Francisco, CA.

January 9

N/S Chamber Orchestra: music of Ernst Bacon, Allan Crossman, Harold Schiffman, Ricardo Tacuchian, & M.J. van Appledorn. Christ & St. Stephen's Church, New York, NY.

January 12

John Palmer discusses Debussy. Musical Offering Classical Record Shop and Cafe, Berkeley, CA.

January 13

Gala Celebration of Michael Tilson Thomas's 60th birthday, and his 10th year with the San Francisco Symphony. Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA.

January 15

Kurt Erickson's *Toccata* premiered by the Sacramento Symphony. Mondavi Center, Davis, CA.

January 18

Sergey Schepkin in Dorrance Stalvey's *Changes*. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

January 21

Gang of Four. Montague Arms, London, UK.

Mark Applebaum's *Entre Funerailles IV* and *Writstwatch: Geology*. Campbell Recital Hall, Stanford University, CA.

Focus Festival. Breaking the Chains: The Soviet Avant-Garde, 1966-1991. Arvo Part's *Pro et Contra*, Giya Kancheli's *Midday Prayers*, Valentin Silvestrov's *Ode to a Nightingale*, and Alfred Schnittke's *Violin Concerto No. 3*. Juilliard School, New York, NY.

Chitose Okashiro in Toru Takemitsu's *For Away* and *Les yeux clos* and *Les yeux clos II*, the world premieres of I. Okashiro's *Wind* and *The Moment*, and selections from Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus*. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY.

January 22

The Kronos Quartet premieres Meredith Monk's *Stringsongs*. Barbican, London, UK. Repeated January 27, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario (Canada).

January 23

Met Orchestra in Elliott Carter's *Variations for Orchestra*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

Oslo String Quartet in Wilhelm Stenhammar's *String Quartet No. 5* and Lasse Thoresen's *Pyr Aionion*. Weill Recital Hall, New York, NY.

January 24

Parisii Quartet in Philip Glass's *Company*, Dorrance Stalvey's *String Quartet 1989*, Arif Mardin's *Three Sketches for String Quartet* and John Cage's *String Quartet in Four Parts*. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

Daniel Barenboim discusses music as a bridge for peace in the Middle East. Columbia University, New York, NY.

Focus Festival. Arvo Part's *Fratres*, Alexander Shchetyhnsky's *Prayer for the Cup*, Valentin Bibik's *Violin Sonata*, Franghiz Ali-Zadeh's *Crossing I*, Osvaldas Balaskauska's *Stui Sonori*, and Faradz Karayev's *Terminus*. Juilliard School, New York, NY.

Cincinnati Symphony in Jan Sibelius's *Symphony No. 5* and Aulis Sallinen's *Symphony No. 8*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

January 25

Beverly Sills announces that she is resigning as chairwoman of the Metropolitan Opera. New York, NY.

January 26

Death of architect Philip Johnson. Glass House, New Canaan, CT.

January 27

Death of Paul Nash, of a brain tumor. Calvary Hospital, New York, NY. "[He was] a composer and guitarist who created orchestral jazz works [and] site-specific compositions for New York public spaces In the San Francisco area, he formed his first large group, the Paul Nash Ensemble, and went on to help form the Bay Area Jazz Composers Orchestra, which included a string quartet" [Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times*, 1/28/05]

January 28

Death of Eric Griffiths (b. Denbigh, Wales, UK, of pancreatic cancer, at 64. Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. "[He was] a guitarist for the Quarrymen, the rock and skiffle band led by John Lennon that eventually evolved into the Beatles. . . . He moved with his family to Liverpool at a young age. On his first day at Quarry Band School when he was 11, he met two students, John Lennon and Pete Shotton, who, Mr. Griffiths later said, shared an interest in 'music, girls, and smoking.' . . . At a concert on July 6, 1957 -- a hallowed date in Beatle lore -- the Quarrymen were heard by a 15-year-old Paul McCartney, who soon joined the group. The next year George Harrison joined as another guitarist and Mr. Griffiths was asked to switch [from guitar] to bass. The instrument was prohibitively expensive, so he left the group and joined the British merchant

navy. He first heard *Please Please Me*, the Beatles' first No. 1 hit, on the radio while on duty in the Persian Gulf. After various name changes, the Quarrymen became the Beatles in 1960. . . . In 1997 Mr. Griffiths joined with the other surviving Quarrymen -- minus its most famous alumni -- to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Cavern, the small Liverpool club where the Quarrymen and the Beatles played in their early years. . . . Soon they had a second career as the reunited Quarrymen, and in concerts around the world hammed it up as the forgotten also-rans of the most famous group in rock'n'roll history" [Ben Sisario, *The New York Times*, 2/4/05].

Death of Lucian Carr. George Washington University, Washington, DC. "A literary lion who never roared, Mr. Carr served as an inspirational muse to a bunch of college chums at Columbia University in the 1940's: the poet Allen Ginsberg and the novelists William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac" [Wilborn Hampton, *The New York Times*, 1/30/05].

Pierre Boulez leads the London Symphony Orchestra in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, and his own *Derive 2*. "In [Derive]'s final sections, the themes are tamed and the relationships are clear, as if Mr. Boulez were telling listeners that if they focus, all will be apparent" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 2/1/05]. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

John Zorn. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY. Repeated January 29, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (MA).

Network for New Music -- IMAGINE. Thomas Whitman's *Piano Quartet*, Gerald Levinson's *At the Still Point of the Turning World*, *There the Dance Is*, and Melinda Wagner's *Romanze with Faux Variations*. Lang Concert Hall, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

January 29

Concert for Tsunami Relief, with Terry Riley. St. Alban's Parish Hall, Albany, CA.

Scott Wheeler's *Democracy*. Washington National Opera, Washington, DC.

January 30

Steve Reich. Metropolitan Museum, New York, NY.

Dawn Upshaw and Orchestra 2001. Lang Concert Hall, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA.

January 31

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players in *Migrations*, including Gyorgy Ligeti's *Piano Etudes*, Book 3. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA.