

# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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MAY 2005

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# Phill Niblock

MARK ALBURGER

A pioneer in overtone compositions, Phill Niblock has been associated with the New York minimalist school since the 1960's.

I chatted with Phill Niblock in the lobby of the Yerba Buena Center in San Francisco, CA, on February 26, two days after the West Coast premiere of *Sethwork* (2003), and immediately after a concert of George Antheil's music, both given as part of the 11th Other Minds Music Festival.

ALBURGER: What did you think of today's concert?

NIBLOCK: It was interesting.

ALBURGER: Given where you are, as a musician, with your extraordinary work, --

NIBLOCK: Thank you.

ALBURGER: -- does Antheil's music resonate with you?

NIBLOCK: Well, it's music that resonates and that I like, and it's historically interesting. But not terribly.

ALBURGER: Would you consider yourself a minimalist?

NIBLOCK: Yes.

ALBURGER: Would you consider some of the other people in this festival minimalists?

NIBLOCK: Well, I consider them more repetitionists...

ALBURGER: So, what is minimalism, as opposed to repetitionism?

NIBLOCK: There's obviously two schools of minimalism: one has to do with rhythm and the other with sustained tones. And they're all minimalists.

ALBURGER: What did you think of your concert two nights ago? How did it go?

NIBLOCK: The monitors were not loud enough.

ALBURGER: I was wondering about that.

NIBLOCK: I dislike very much to do one piece. It really takes a while to settle in.

ALBURGER: When did you start doing visuals of manual labor with your music?

NIBLOCK: In 1973. Previous to that I used images of nature, as far back as 1967 -- a series of sunsets, for instance.

ALBURGER: And previous to that?

NIBLOCK: I began doing film. I was shooting a lot of films, including one of Sun Ra.

ALBURGER: Not every composer has a visual sense, but there is a lineage -- Schoenberg, Gershwin.

NIBLOCK: I started doing photography, then film and music.

ALBURGER: So now it's time to go way back. Are you a native New Yorker?

NIBLOCK: I grew up in Indiana. I came to New York after having gone to school at Indiana University in Economics, and having been in the Army for a few years -- I was drafted.

ALBURGER: What years?

NIBLOCK: '56 to '58. As soon as I got out, I came to New York. What the Army did was to actually teach me how to travel. By now I have traveled extensively.

ALBURGER: Where did you travel in the Army?

NIBLOCK: I traveled a lot in the South. I was stationed in southern Alabama for 18 months. I went to Washington, and took a month's leave and went to Europe. The Army was immensely useful, because I learned how to travel and got a handle on that. I might have been a third-generation Bedouin....

ALBURGER: It's amazing how the times contribute to the life experience: what you got out of the Army was so different than what people experienced, say, ten years later. What you got was a chance to tour Europe. I remember Peter Maxwell Davies saying to me that music was initially his ticket for him out of the lower-middle class. For you, the Army was your ticket out of Indiana.

NIBLOCK: And after the Army, New York. I was a big jazz fan, and I was very interested in sound. I had a tape recorder early on. I listened to classical music, too. And when I came to New York, I immediately tried to find contemporary classical music.

ALBURGER: Did you run into John Cage?

NIBLOCK: I did. I saw him and David Tudor. They were messing around with pianos, banging on them. It was amazing.

ALBURGER: Was that an inspiration?

NIBLOCK: It was an inspiration. There was a period when Morton Feldman was working with long durations --

ALBURGER: Yes.

NIBLOCK: A series of pieces. That was a revelation to hear that music was happening with subtle rhythm or no rhythm, and so, in a way, that was a revolution. And I knew what I wanted to do, because I was also very influenced by the minimalists in art. I became interested in the open timbres of instruments -- and their complexities -- the notion of the sustained chords that become "out of tune." The first piece was for an organ that was simply out of tune in different stops for the same pitches.

ALBURGER: And that was what year?

NIBLOCK: '68. *Organic One!*.

ALBURGER: That organ was where?

NIBLOCK: In the Judson Church. That was the first big performance. I had just passed my 30th birthday. I guess it was in December.

ALBURGER: So you heard Cage. Were you associated with Fluxus?

NIBLOCK: I knew what they were doing. I went to a lot of concerts.

ALBURGER: What about La Monte Young's music specifically?

NIBLOCK: I heard some of his controversial pieces. They were interesting events. I got to one -- in the Hamptons, by riding my motorcycle, right after work -- and I hadn't eaten, and there was vodka, but no food.

ALBURGER: That must have made an impression.

NIBLOCK: It was a good concert. It was an amazing concert.

ALBURGER: How loud was it?

NIBLOCK: Very loud.

ALBURGER: Would that have been the Theatre of Eternal Music?

NIBLOCK: I think so.

ALBURGER: One of the drone-bass improv pieces?

NIBLOCK: Yes. It was the stuff that La Monte actually didn't do much in.

ALBURGER: Was his music a direct influence?

NIBLOCK: I would say it was an influence.

FEMALE VOICE: Will you be coming to the concert tonight?

NIBLOCK: I gave away my comps, so I'll have to sneak in the back door.

ALBURGER: We'll get you a reviewer's ticket!

NIBLOCK: Trade you for this extra San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I went today, and it was great.

ALBURGER: So that organ piece was a beginning. Were there particular stops that had appealing difference-tones.

NIBLOCK: I'm not a musician, so I probably wouldn't even have looked at that aspect.

ALBURGER: Interesting. Do you basically consider yourself not a musician?

NIBLOCK: I'm not a musician, period. I'm not a musician. I don't practice.

ALBURGER: O.K. Is that a definition of a musician: someone who practices?

NIBLOCK: You're not a musician without practicing -- without doing it.

ALBURGER: So from the organ work....

NIBLOCK: I began recording musicians by themselves, so they weren't tuning with each other. I got a chance to record on one of the original 16-track recorders in Boston, so I'd go up there on a Friday evening for the weekend.

ALBURGER: Wow! And you would invite people to record there?

NIBLOCK: Well, I did a couple of times -- we recorded. But mostly I would mix up there.

ALBURGER: That makes a long weekend going up to Boston.

NIBLOCK: Yes. Tiring. Then I got my own multi-track machine. The first pieces were made by doubling back-and-forth on different tape recorders.

ALBURGER: What sound sources were you dealing with?

NIBLOCK: Pretty much all instruments. Tenor saxophone was one of the earliest sources.

ALBURGER: Would you tend to focus, as this piece did on Thursday, on one timbre per composition?

NIBLOCK: Normally I would use more, but sometimes that would be a fault -- there would be too many tones happening at once. Then I tended to come back to much, much less

ALBURGER: Do you have a background in acoustics or physics?

NIBLOCK: No. I mean, I never studied any of that stuff even after I was doing it. So it was never a very scientific investigation. I was just working with what was happening... Recognizing what was happening.

ALBURGER: And how loud should the pieces be?

NIBLOCK: I normally work at about 110 to 115 decibels.

ALBURGER: And that's not damaging to the ear.

NIBLOCK: No..... If you were doing it for 24 hours a day.... I've had myself problems relatively seldom, but once, in a four-hour concert in Hamburg, I was sitting under two speakers and I lost my hearing briefly, but it came back pretty quickly. But it was four hours of very steady, intense tones.

ALBURGER: Would that be close to an optimal length for a performance?

NIBLOCK: One to six hours. One hour is the minimum I like to do, and two hours is very good. And it depends on the venue and the audience. If I'm performing in a strange place, people can stay for the full performance time, or people can come and go. I do a regular six-hour concert on December 21 in New York. I start at 6. I've done 8-hour concerts which end at 2. Optimally, I show six images simultaneously. The screen for this recent Other Minds show was too far from the audience.

ALBURGER: So what we got on Thursday was too short, with the images too far away.

NIBLOCK: Two images at once is OK. One is not good. This concert was part of a tour. I just did a concert in Detroit and the facility was quite nice for a relatively small space. Since the beginning of the year, we've been in Antwerp, Belgium; Bologna, Italy; and came back to Montreal, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee, and I go to Boston next. I do about 30-40 concerts a year and am touring about 9 months a year, and I'm spending much time of the time in Europe.

ALBURGER: Knowing that some composers in the 60's had to do something else for a living, when did it become clear that this is what you do?

NIBLOCK: I was a college professor for 27 years.

ALBURGER: That was my next question.

NIBLOCK: This art doesn't make any goddam money, that's for sure!

ALBURGER: Still... It doesn't.

NIBLOCK: No! Most of my gigs are in places that can't afford to pay much money. This is actually a fairly high-paying gig.

ALBURGER: A college professor of what? Photography?

NIBLOCK: I taught photography, and film and video...

ALBURGER: Where?

NIBLOCK: The College of Staten Island -- it's part of the City University of New York.

ALBURGER: So you took the Staten Island Ferry?

NIBLOCK: Yes. A lot.

ALBURGER: I just took that at Christmas.

NIBLOCK: That wasn't so bad. It was going to school that was bad!

ALBURGER. Going to school was bad.

NIBLOCK: I didn't like teaching.

ALBURGER: You didn't like teaching. And yet you put in 27 years.

NIBLOCK: 27 years. And retirement's fun, so to speak.

ALBURGER: So it's good now. And it was photography and film.

NIBLOCK: Film and video production.

ALBURGER: Film and video production; so that was the day job.

NIBLOCK: It started as film. It was hard work, because I taught two days a week and then three.

ALBURGER: Did you feel like there was a community of minimalist-repetitionist composers through that time?

NIBLOCK: Not a school for me, but I knew those guys.

ALBURGER: When did you become the artistic director of Experimental / Intermedia?

NIBLOCK: In 1985, but I was a member artist and a producer of events from 1968. By the late 80's we were doing a lot of artist services.

ALBURGER: You've survived when a lot of organizations haven't.

NIBLOCK: EI also has a CD record label, as well as producing 15 to 25 concerts a year. We have about 25 releases on the CD label.

ALBURGER: How does directing work when you're on the road so much?

NIBLOCK: Well, nothing much happens until I return for the concert season, and I can do most of the organizing by email!

# Concert Reviews

## Extension Chords

DAVID CLEARY

*Extension Works: Performers Showcase No. 2 and Valedictory Concert.* May 29, 2003, Killian Hall, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.

It's been written that music reviews are post-mortems, ordinarily chronicling a bygone moment rather than whetting the reader's appetite for a repeat engagement. This is true of the current essay in more ways than one, being a critique of the final concert to be given by the group Extension Works. Founded in 1983, this composer consortium type entity was uniquely resilient, far outlasting all similar organizations started up in the post-Composers-in-Red-Sneakers wave of such presenters. Its original membership, pianist Kathleen Supove and composers Randall Woolf, Charles Dvorak, John Sharpley, and T. Lawrence McKinley, had long since given way to a later group configuration including Robert Kyr and Jay Alan Yim as well as the most recent stable trio of Robert Carl, Marti Epstein, and John McDonald. There's been no drop-off in quality, though, in spite of Extension Works's revolving door lineup. As befits a last event, the music heard was for the most part thoughtful, occasionally bittersweet in mood, without seeming morbid—essentially farewells sans regrets.

This was a particularly apt characterization of the two clarinet/viola/piano trios on the program. The excellent *Vienna Dreams* (1998) by Elliott Schwartz traces its sultry nostalgic ethos to liberal citation of material written by Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms. But Schwartz is no lazy plagiarist, deftly combining quotes so that the harmonic language floats effortlessly between bald tonality and biting dissonance without seeming disjointed. It also unfolds satisfyingly in a long-range sense. Epstein's *See Even Night* (2001), inspired by the text to a Henry Purcell song, is another worthy addition to this composer's post-Morton Feldman inspired portfolio. One encounters large-scale architecture here that on various levels encompasses aspects of rondo, ternary, and variation procedure expressed in a non-traditional manner. And the sound world is lovely from end to end. Its twenty-plus minutes on stage seemed like no time at all. Carl's viola/piano duet *Excavating the Perfect Farewell* (2003) consisted of two movements played without pause that outlined a logical premise: state motivic fragments, then combine them into a longer-spun melody. Despite employment of such avant-garde staples as spatial placement of the string soloist and inside-the-keyboard strumming, the sense of warm reflection is not disturbed. And the sonic language, based on pitch collections derived from the harmonic series, is unusual and imaginative.

Looking for a viola and clarinet duo? The prolific McDonald has one in his nearly 400-count portfolio. His *Sonata Super Re, Mi, Fa, Op. 359* (2000-01) is in fact a sizable essay for this pairing, well crafted and substantial. Its four movements feature formats both clearly etched and unusually cast. And despite a good bit of pensive music, especially in the exquisite slow movement, there's enough energy to keep the listener riveted. *Tesserae* (2002) by Arthur Levering proved an agreeable foil to the generally low-key proceedings. This clangorous, intense, obsessive number features spellbindingly colorful writing for its viola and piano scoring. It's a set of variations and a riveting one at that, cast in a three-part configuration both lucidly delineated and highly effective.

Performances, by violist Scott Woolweaver and clarinetist Ian Greitzer (both long-time veterans of concerts by this group) as well as pianist McDonald, were top-notch throughout.

Hearty huzzahs go to Extension Works for both a splendid sendoff concert and a highly meaningful, much appreciated stint on the Boston new music scene. Thanks for a wonderful 20 years -- you'll be sorely missed.

## Brave Heart

DAVID CLEARY

*Brave New Works.* June 3, 2003, Goddard Chapel, Tufts University, Medford, MA. Additional concert June 8.

Brave New Works, a contemporary ensemble consisting of recent University of Michigan graduates, recently enjoyed a week-long residency at Tufts University. Your reviewer was able to catch two of their three presentations, June 3's consisting of solo selections and June 8's encompassing small chamber items of varied configuration.



The music heard at the former made a rich case for the erroneous notion that brand-name composers typically produce the choicest listening experiences. Grazyna Bacewicz's *Sonata per Violino Solo* and Earl Kim's *Caprices for Solo Violin* (nine of which were played) are compelling updates of 19th-century showpieces by Paganini and his ilk—the latter being of the character piece type, the former of substantive absolute music. Both are breathtaking to hear and ably constructed to boot, with Bacewicz's opus further featuring an eloquent gestural foreground. "The Drunken Fisherman" from Bright Sheng's *Seven Tunes Heard in China* is a multihued tour de force of pizzicato techniques for its cello soloist that at times evokes the sound of oriental plucked instruments. *Carny* for solo piano is of course one of John Zorn's classic jump-cut selections, one that holds up well under repeated hearings. The only big-name tonemeister to miss the mark here was R. Murray Schafer; his *The Crown of Ariadne*, for a harpist playing not only the instrument one expects but also a plethora of percussion, is colorful to the hilt, rivaling Carlos Salzedo's output in sheer number of special effects. Regrettably, the piece also wanders and is too lengthy.

Of the lesser-knowns, Michael Colquhoun came off best. His brief and charming solo flute entry *Charanga* drapes its Latin American sounding fabric with subtle yet pervasive extended techniques such as multiphonics and speak-play passages. Kristin Kuster's *Indoors Again: Three Songs for Voice and Piano* has a jazzy feel reminiscent of Leonard Bernstein; the first two songs are as fluffy as cotton batting, the last a little more weighty. The Toru Takemitsu-like *Rain at the Eaves Just Right for Sleeping* by Tufts student Ryan Vigil, while not a total success, does boast a keen ear for effective piano timbres.

The concert on June 8, by contrast, featured worthy listens regardless of composer name recognition. Karim Al-Zand's *Winter Scenes* for soprano, flute, viola, and harp is in an attractive post-Impressionist vein that skirts tonality without wholeheartedly indulging in it. Wedded to unobtrusive use of intricate devices such as inversion canons and linear palindromes, the result is an ideal combination of the sensual and brainy. *Duetto for Piano, Four Hands* Op. 371 by John McDonald displays this composer's ability to concoct the perfect divertimento, deftly folding snatches of Bizet, Grieg, and Brahms into the second of its two ably built movements. *Pierrot Songs* by Leslie Bassett sets three Albert Giraud poems not utilized in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. In doing so, Bassett creates three intriguing selections that, despite employing the same Schoenbergian scoring and casting its material in an Expressionist sonic universe, sound entirely personal and please greatly. Scored for soprano, viola, and piano, Bright Sheng's *Three Chinese Love Songs* state actual folk tunes from that country but provide backing that, while tonally centered, add plenty of dissonant interference that imparts a tellingly tangy bite -- in a sense being an Eastern answer to Bartók's oeuvre. *Praeludium* by John Berners, while a little vague from a formal standpoint, packs an agreeable amount of intensity into its brief confines. And the periodic appearance of antiphonal and fugal writing in this large mixed ensemble item is most welcome. While his *Piano Quintet* shows William Bolcom to be enamored of older aesthetic principles, this fine composition transcends any prior influence to become a strong, vital selection. There isn't a precious bone in its substantial body.

Performances were excellent. The first concert's most notable efforts included Maria Sampen's showy yet scrupulously accurate violin playing in the Bacewicz and Amy Ley's wonderfully flexible harp turn in the Schafer. Remarkable too was Winston Choi's version of *Carny*, which uniquely stressed the continuity rather than the fractured nature of this fragmented selection, imparting an unusually stable sense of organic unity to the whole. While every item on Sunday's event was given in inspired fashion, one must specially cite soprano Jennifer Goltz's singing -- big, sonorous, well-controlled in all registers, and excellently enunciated. Conductor Chris Younghoon Kim presided over excellent incarnations of the Bassett and Berners.

In brief, Brave New Works was shown to live up to its name, bravery being concocted from skill, heart, and guts. All applied here, bravos being well earned.

# Opera Unlimited

## DAVID CLEARY

Opera Unlimited. June 5, 2003, Tower Auditorium, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA. Through June 10. Reviewed June 5, 6, and 10.

Despite a rich concert music tradition, Boston has never been considered an especially hospitable city for opera -- and since Sarah Caldwell left town, that has been exponentially so for contemporary examples of the genre. Opera Unlimited, a partnership of Opera Boston (formerly the Boston Academy of Music) and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, is a laudable attempt to address this glaring oversight, putting on three evenings' worth (plus one repeat performance each) of mainly single-act stage works written by living composers.

Opening night saw the presentation of two short operas by Daniel Pinkham. Of these, *The Cask of Amontillado* (2003), one of two pieces commissioned specially for this series, pleased greatly. A retelling of the spooky, revenge-minded short story by Edgar Allan Poe, it's stylistically an updating of Britten and Menotti that knows its own mind, as well as dramatically being economical and effective. *Garden Party* (1984) comically retells the tale of Adam and Eve, incorporating material from such incongruous sources as Mark Twain, Norma Farber, and Julia Child into the expected biblical fare. Somewhat less successful on the whole, it does contain some delightfully memorable set pieces, such as Scene 3's send-up of religious services scored for barbershop quartet and ebulliently enthusiastic chorus. And the piece's goofy, often irreverent sense of humor is a major asset. Musically, it's succinctly described as a mating of *The Rake's Progress* and vaudeville.

June 6's presentation of *Powder Her Face* by Thomas Ades, an ambitious work based on a true-to-life circumstance that chronicles the prurient rise and fall of a British duchess, was decidedly not successful, a problem largely traceable back to the composer. Orchestral accompaniments are lavishly overwritten and often sludgy in texture, routinely drowning out the singers. And on those few occasions one can actually hear the vocal lines, they prove less than idiomatic and not optimally designed for text intelligibility. Judging from this piece, Ades clearly knows 20<sup>th</sup> century opera literature; filching of passages and effects from Britten, Stravinsky, and especially Berg are heard in abundance. But despite a liberal overlay of glissando figures on snatched materials as well as allusions to early 20<sup>th</sup> century pop idioms, the opera remains an eccentric patchwork style study, not a compelling personal statement.

The final program saw two worthy one-act entities staged. Setting William Butler Yeats's cryptic play about a swineherd's futile -- and fatal -- attempt to woo a haughty queen, *A Full Moon in March* (1977) shows composer John Harbison at an interesting crossroads. Here the harmonic language hearkens back to his more experimental oeuvre of the 1960's and early 1970's (there's much dissonance in the chords employed as well as prominent appearance of prepared piano sonorities) while showing glimmers of his more familiar post-Neoclassic output (evident in the rhythmic gestures and the tonally focused background pitch basis). Yet the mating results not in a freakish hybrid, but rather in a fully unified sounding whole that's also tight, effective theatre. Equally telling as stage entertainment is Elena Ruehr's *Toussaint Before the Spirits* (2003), the second of Opera Unlimited's commissions. It presents the last hours of Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led a revolt against the French in Haiti and was then captured, held in solitary confinement, and executed without trial. Here, the title character is visited in his cell by apparitions, including his adopted nephew Moyse, and examines the motivations and justness of his actions. Like the Harbison, it successfully synthesizes influences from two unlikely sources, Haitian folk music and 18<sup>th</sup> century opera, into its fabric—the sound world being scalar in nature yet not entirely grounded tonally. There's loads of kinetic energy in the score as well as a gripping, though not overbearing intensity to the gestures. Like the Harbison, it's a joy to experience.

Performances were generally good. Singing was for the most part strong, with a show-stopping effort given by Steven Salters in the title role of *Toussaint* and eminently worthy vocal turns put forth by James Maddalena in *Full Moon*, Ramone Diggs in *Toussaint*, Emily Browder in *Garden Party*, and (in those few moments one could hear her) Janna Baty in *Powder*. Salters, Browder, and *Cask's* Richard Conrad (noteworthy also as the originator of the aforementioned Boston Academy of Music) demonstrated first rate acting ability as well. Choral singing in the Pinkham selections was handled expertly, and the six dancers in the Ruehr were terrifically good. Conductors John Finney (in the Pinkham operas) and Gil Rose (in all else) presided over pit ensembles that performed with distinction.

Production aspects ranged from excellent to poor. The heartiest cheer goes to Nicola Hawkins's direction and choreography in *Toussaint*, which was stunning in its complexity and energy, unabashedly splendid to look at. Also notable were the stagings of *Powder* (over the top) by Steven Maler and *Garden Party* (charming) by Conrad. Unfortunately, Patricia-Maria Weinmann's direction in *Cask* glossed over the key plot denouement, omitting Montessor's brick-up of Fortunato in a catacomb wall and allowing this latter character to submit himself too readily to being manacled up immediately prior. Chris Ortrom's often murky lighting proved evocative in *Cask* but less effective elsewhere. Toni Elliott's costumes were basic yet capable, at their best in *Powder* and *Cask*. Scenic designer Laura McPherson's minimalist sets showed every penny pinched, generally being drab and pedestrian—and when she moved in more adventurous directions, the sense of misstep loomed very large (such as a claustrophobically garish apple tree in *Garden Party* and jarringly anachronistic modern swivel chairs and stools for *Full Moon*). The performance space also left much to be desired on many levels ranging from uncomfortable, even collapsed, audience seats to dicey acoustics; it's altogether possible that a few of the problems with such things as lighting and vocal projection had origins in the hall's inadequacies.

Flaws aside, Opera Unlimited is a fine idea that this time around allowed some splendid dramatic items to see the light of day. Here's hoping for future installments.

## Piano Institute

### DAVID CLEARY

Summer Institute for Contemporary Piano Performance. June 23, 2003, Williams Recital Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA. Through June 28, with additional programs in Brown Hall.

The latest installment of Stephen Drury's Summer Institute for Contemporary Piano Performance, based at the New England Conservatory, searched no further than the school's doors to find its special guest composer. Lee Hyla, chair of the college's composition department, furnished a clutch of top-flight items for the festival's listeners. Your reviewer was able to hear four of the six concerts presented.

The series kicked off with two splendid works, one composed by Hyla within the last decade, the other regarded as a long-standing classic of the piano's contemporary repertoire. *Basic Training* (1994), like much of Hyla's oeuvre, is dramatic, craggy, and arresting, crammed with vigor and wonderful to hear. Spun from a series of pounded single notes and clangorous chords seemingly inspired by those from Copland's *Piano Variations*, this tightly knit selection describes a ternary format obliquely derived from sonata models. Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata* (1915) rightly earns its place among the finest solo keyboard works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remarkable not only for its sheer size but also its variety of expression, originality, and vision. Drury's performances were inspired -- his Hyla as bracing as a splash of aftershave lotion, his Ives (from memory) sheer poetry in its subtle delineation of mood and line, careful pedal use, beauty of tone color, and thoughtful pacing which laid bare the long-range structure of this sprawling opus. One couldn't have asked for more.

Argentinean pianist Haydee Schwartz was the featured soloist on Tuesday night. Her program included a complete performance of the music to John Cage's *Four Walls* (1944) as well as a gaggle of entities collected for the late pianist Yvar Mikashoff's 1984 *Tango Project*. The latter ranged from the sultry literalness of Dane Rudhyar's *Tango d'Antan* (1914) to the off-kilter surrealism of *Tango No Tango* (1984) by Jackson Hill to the pointillist polyrhythms of Conlon Nancarrow's *Tango?* (1984) to the nebulous indeterminacy of *Perpetual Tango* (1984) by Cage (this last in realizations concocted by five Argentine composers). The Nancarrow and Rudhyar proved especially effective. *Four Walls* is an unusual and fascinating entry. Composed during the heyday of Cage's prepared piano period, it's scored for standard, unadulterated piano with one brief movement for solo voice inserted about halfway through. It proves to be an important link between the output of two of last century's most important minimalists, Erik Satie and Morton Feldman, and at times even anticipates the process idioms of Phillip Glass and similar folks. The overall tenor of this composition is anomalous; rather than putting forth Cage's trademark delicacy, humor, and life-affirming friendliness, the music is stark and obsessive, yet noble and often anguished in feel. Harmonies are pandiatonic and unfold statically. Most surprisingly of all, Cage manages to pace the materials in such a way that the listener stays fascinated; anyone accustomed to the leisurely unfolding of John Adams and Steve Reich will find *Four Walls* riveting (your reviewer enjoyed it greatly). Schwartz's playing was excellent in its many facets: warm-toned in the Rudhyar, spotless in the Nancarrow, intensely focused in *Four Walls*. The solo voice movement of this last was provided by ex-Cream front man Jack Bruce via recording.

Audience members were treated to two winners from the Hyla portfolio on Wednesday. *Riff and Transfiguration* (1996) for piano solo is a collection of seven relatively brief divisions that show notable kinship to character pieces. Each is based on a small yet pregnant motif (a “riff” in jazz lingo) that generates its fabric. As might be expected, these are taut, evocative little listens that harbor vibrant contrasts. For mixed sextet, *Amnesia Variance* (1989) convincingly alternates raucous and expressive snatches into its single movement boundary. It too is judicious in gestural use, derived mostly from an elaborated unison opening idea. *Albrecht Durer I. -- St. Jerome in His Study*, by Paul Elwood, is also a worthy listen, utilizing a chromatic fragment as a unifying device throughout its narrative curve format. It’s attractively written for two pianos, exploring a number of well-considered idiomatic textures. The solo piano *Disciplines* (1998) by Mark Applebaum are less successful. Structural considerations seem loose and less than convincing, and the relative movement lengths (outer movements sizeable, inner ones varying degrees of short) seem haphazardly considered. Unfortunately, these highly dissonant items never really leave the realm of compositional puzzles to become compelling musical statements. They do call for a staggering array of piano playing approaches, though, something keyboardist Shannon Wettstein took ample advantage of. Here, she ran the gamut of moods from introspective to gregarious while always maintaining lucid finger work and full yet not overbearing tone. Rachel Jimenez’s presentation of *Riffs* took no prisoners in its showy, forceful manner of execution, though the work’s few quiet movements showed her able to put forth a warmly controlled sound quality. Duo pianists Drury and Yukiko Takagi demonstrated both fine individual execution and sensitive ensemble interaction in a first-rate presentation of the Elwood. And Drury conducted his malleable member group, the Callithumpian Consort, in a performance of *Amnesia Variance* that capably combined drive and thoughtfulness.

Friday saw a continuation of the programming theme of one huge selection surrounded by shorter fare. The focal work here was Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Kontakte* (1958-60). For piano, percussion, and tape, it’s a classic of the 1950’s European pointillist serial era and arguably its most listenable example, effectively cast in a huge narrative curve configuration. Once again, the strongest smaller piece came courtesy of Hyla, a mixed quartet titled *Ciao, Manhattan* (1990). Uniquely, it’s the only composition of his that remains quietly contemplative throughout, almost Impressionist in its ravishing textures but not less directional or well-built than anything else from his pen. Lei Liang’s *Trio* for cello, piano, and percussion is a sturdy, well-considered listen that if anything blocks out its formal divisions too pointedly, though the material defining these sections is certainly attractive, making heavy and able use of special effects. *Electronic Music for Piano* (1964), another John Cage entry, wound up containing lots of fetching sounds if not exactly constituting an intelligible work. As always, performances were strong. Pianist Drury, in tandem with Jorrit Dijkstra (who manned the electronic modification equipment), gave a pleasing account of the Cage, while conductor Drury led his Callithumpians in a solid rendition of

the Liang trio. The group showed that they can function just as well leaderless, too—their version of *Ciao* sensitively plumbed the work’s inherent color possibilities. And *Kontakte* got a truly wonderful performance from pianist Takagi and percussionist Robert Schulz that ideally coordinated technical precision and driving abandon. The fact that no one left during the performance despite the hall’s oppressive heat speaks volumes for the quality of music making.

In short, this set of concerts was a pleasure to attend, a splendid showcase for some of New England Conservatory’s most talented faculty as well as various outside worthies.

## Dancing with Dinosaurs

### DAVID CLEARY

Dancing with Dinosaurs: Dinosaur Annex and Nicola Hawkins Dance Company. Milton Babbitt’s *Homily* (1987), Margaret Brouwer’s *Chamber Concerto* (1991); Peter Flint’s *Migratory Routes* (2002), Charles Fussell’s *Piano Trio* (1999), Aaron Jay Kernis: *Mozart En Route* (1991), Eric Moe’s *On the Tip of My Tongue* (1993)’s, David Rakowski’s *Twofer*, Elena Ruehr’s *The Law of Floating Objects* (2000), Scott Wheeler’s *Brief Glimpses*. November 14, 2003, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

The Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble’s unusual name stems from its initial incarnation as a pit band for the now defunct New England Dinosaur Dance Theater troupe. This pair of concerts, given in tandem with the Nicola Hawkins Dance Company, thus represented a return to roots for the group.

Of the myriad musical entities encountered on Friday evening, four pleased especially. David Rakowski’s top-notch violin/cello duo *Twofer* is cleverly and satisfyingly constructed, delineating an ABAB format whose brief outer sections contrast greatly in tempo and mood, leaving the two central portions to develop these truncated bookends extensively. Common to all are snatches of octave material, which neatly impart overall unity. *Homily* (1987) by Milton Babbitt proves much more interesting than a solo snare drum piece has any right to be, making most convincing use of varied sticks and overlaid rhythmic planes. A second listen to *The Law of Floating Objects* (2000), a flute and tape selection by Elena Ruehr first encountered on a Dinosaur Annex concert a few years ago, reaffirmed its luscious layering of Stravinskian primitivist lines in neo-process fashion while revealing a subtle underlying sense of balance and unfolding that imparts depth to its gorgeous sonic landscape. *Brief Glimpses*, by Scott Wheeler, takes its flute and viola pair on a short but sweet journey from angular rawness to placid warmth, anchoring its spiky material upon recurring E-flats.

The concise character piece movements of Charles Fussell's *Piano Trio* (1999), while structurally nebulous both singly and as a unit, demonstrate a fetching sense of profile and polished handling of an unusual harmonic idiom that mixes Expressionist polytonality and Copland-like openness. Scored for string trio, Aaron Jay Kernis's *Mozart En Route* (1991) derives its melodic fabric from the older composer's K. 563 *Divertimento*, cleverly pushing said material through both high- and low-culture contexts. What it lacks in formal tightness is made up for in cheeky attitude and supple speech.

The remaining items, single movements from Eric Moe's *On the Tip of My Tongue* (1993, for bass clarinet and synthesizer), Margaret Brouwer's *Chamber Concerto* (1991, for clarinet, piano, and percussion), and Peter Flint's *Migratory Routes* (2002, for Pierrot ensemble plus percussion) are to varying degrees texturally motoric and aesthetically disposable, filled with energy but mostly short on memorable contour and convincing architecture. The Moe work's consistency of texture made it the best of these selections.

The accompanying choreography was richly evocative and generally seemed a good fit for the underlying music. The bare-bones approach to lighting, costumes, backdrops, and props imparted a sense of elemental urgency to the dancers' movements. Of special merit were the vibrant terpsichorean solos by Nicola Hawkins (to Wheeler's piece) and Jessica Reed (to the Rakowski).

Performances on the musical end of things unfortunately proved of highly variable quality. Some items, such as the Kernis, Moe, and Brouwer, seemed under-rehearsed, though in all fairness, no amount of polish could have ably put forth the last composition's spectacularly ungainly clarinet writing. The best such executions were, however, well worth the price of admission. One should single out percussionist Craig McNutt (in the Babbitt), Sue Ellen Herschman-Tcherepnin (in the Ruehr), and Cyrus Stevens and Michael Curry (in the Rakowski) for particularly exemplary efforts.

## East Meets West Meets East

### MARK ALBURGER

China Philharmonic in Béla Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Overture to "The Tsar's Bride,"* Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Hua Tanjun's *Moon Reflected on the Erquan Fountain*, and Ye Xiaogang's *Lied auf der Erde*. March 6, Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA

Chinoiserie and Sinofication.

The first is that turn-of-the-last-century turn-of-phrase for Western music that imitates Eastern sources -- Maurice Ravel's *Princess of the Pagodas*, Igor Stravinsky's *The Song of the Nightingale*, and Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* come to mind. The second term can include a turning-of-the-tables: Western music transformed by the East.

Both were fully in evidence in the March 6 local debut at Davies Hall of the China Philharmonic Orchestra, founded 2000 in Beijing by Music Director Long Yu, and a local multicultural audience turned out in full force.

At the simplest level in Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Overture to "The Tsar's Bride"* and Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, this first-rate ensemble has made the music its own (and each of these Russian composers had various Eastern connections in their overall output). Pianist Lang Lang was soloist in the second, and he carried off the music, including the "Dies Irae" ("Day of Wrath") fragments with a flair that sustained him through wandering Franz Liszt ("Petrarch's Sonate 104" from *Years of Pilgrimage: II Italy*) and dazzling Rimsky ("The Flight of the Bumblebee") encores (why is it that most encores allow us to listen again to the featured performer but not the orchestra?).

The connections were even clearer in the two offerings by Chinese composers. The first was a thorough-going-over of the beautiful folk tune *Moon Reflected on the Erquan Fountain*, named and recorded by musicologist Yang Yinliu, as played by erhu master Hua Yanjun (known as A'bing), arranged by Wu Ziqiang. Despite all the cooks, the broth was not spoiled, and the 30-odd violinists came off as an odd mass erhu section (funny that we think nothing of a plethora of massed western strings), complete with glissandi ornamentation.

The second offering was truly along "China Reconstructs" lines: Ye Xiaogang's *Das Lied auf der Erde (The Song from the Earth)*, a resetting of what was most likely the original Chinese poetry in Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth -- the Austrian composer, not surprisingly, had used German translations)*. Here was music no doubt closer to the roots, and soprano Luwa Ke made the most of expressive slides reminiscent of Peking Opera and sprechstimme and laughter that had later Austrian connections to Arnold Schoenberg. Like both of his Germanic predecessors, Ye Xiaogang's orchestration was vibrantly colorful, making exciting use of Chinese percussion instruments, especially in the extended existential postlude in the last of the five songs. Sinofication rules.

The true chinoiserie came at the end, with Béla Bartók's great *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*, which, while suffering from a few lapses in dynamic excitement, reared up for a breakneck finale the likes of which have never been experienced. There's almost something unintentionally racist in this caricature of the East as a land of exotic barbarity, but from another perspective, this is just an excuse for hot-blooded early-20th-century modernism, and the China Philharmonic had the last laugh.

# Chronicle

March 4

*Doubles and Triples*. Pacifica, Ying, and Chiara Quartets in Steve Reich's *Triple Quartet* and Darius Milhaud's *Double Quartet*. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, NY, NY.

March 6

China Philharmonic in Béla Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Overture to "The Tsar's Bride,"* Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Hua Tanjun's *Moon Reflected on the Erquan Fountain*, and Ye Xiaogang's *Lied auf der Erde*. Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA. Repeated March 13, Carnegie Hall, New York (NY). "[I]n the Bartók, the orchestra's zesty, robust reading was a few notches short of the ferocity that parts of the score demand" [Allan Kozinn, New York Times, 3/15/05].

Marin Symphony in Roberto Sierra's *Folias*. Veterans Auditorium, San Rafael, CA. Repeated March 8. "Sierra offers a mountainous collection of Hispanic modernism in "Folias," along the lines of Joaquin Rodrigo, with a neobaroque clarity, pitching in tricky rhythms that [guitarist Manuel] Barrueco bandied about. Ole! The music took the bull by the French horns and castanets (hmm, perhaps that's enough of that metaphor...), and matador Barrueco triumphed (no, it's not...). Aye, caramba! A standing ovation" [Mark Alburger, Commuter Times, 3/11/05].

March 7

XTET in George Crumb's *Madrigals (Books I and II)* and Russell Peck's *Automobiles*. County Museum, LA, CA.

March 11

American Symphony Orchestra in *Hans Christian Andersen*. Paul Klenau's *Little Ida's Flowers*, Karel Husa's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, Igor Stravinsky's *The Song of the Nightingale*, and Alexander Zemlinsky's *The Mermaid*. Fisher Hall, NY, NY

Vienna Philharmonic in Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

March 12

Merce Cunningham Dance Company White Plaza Event #1, including Mark Applebaum's *The Bible without God*, John Zorn's *Cobra*, and a pre-overture 24-hour tag-team performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations*, performed by 36 pianists. In front of the bookstore, Stanford University, CA.

March 13

Oakland Civic Orchestra - Composers Alive!, conducted by Martha Stoddard, including Alexis Alrich's *Avenues*. St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Oakland, CA.

North/South Consonance Chamber Orchestra. Christ and St. Stephen's Church, New York, NY.

Cantori in Keith Roberts's *Veni*. Cathedral of the Incarnation, Garden City, NY. Repeated March 20, The Church of the Holy Trinity, New York.

March 16

*Tales of Denmark*. Carl Nielsen's *Violin Sonata*, Hermann Koppel's *Divertimento Pastorale*, Gunnar Berg's *The Princess and the Pea*, Carl Nielsen's *Phantasy Pieces*, Sergei Prokofiev's *The Ugly Duckling*, and Charles Loeffler's *Rhapsodies for Oboe, Viola, and Piano*. Weill Hall, NY, NY.

March 17

Death of Gary Bertini (b. 5/1/27, Brichevo, Bessarabia [Modova]), of lymphatic cancer, at 77. Tel Hashomer, Israel. "A former music director of the Israel Chamber Ensemble and the Jerusalem Symphony, Mr. Bertini was also active internationally, holding posts with the Scottish National Orchestra and Scottish Opera, the Frankfurt Opera, the Detroit Symphony, the Rome Opera and others. At his death he was the music director of the Teatro San Carlo in Naples and artistic director of the New Israeli Opera in Tel Aviv. . . . Bertini emigrated to Palestine with his family as a child and pursued musical studies there, in Milan, and in Paris, where he worked with Nadia Boulanger and Arthur Honegger. . . . He did not make his international debut until he was nearly 40, conducting at Yehudi Menuhin's festival in Bath, England . . . His wide-ranging repertory extended from . . . Josquin . . . to . . . Ligeti . . . . A DVD of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, which he conducted at the Opera National de Paris in 2000 was recently released" [Anne Midgette, NYT, 3/25/05].

March 18

International Contemporary Ensemble presents *To the Four Corners: Huang Ruo / Linda Schrank*. Leonard Nimoy Thalia Theater, Symphony Space, New York, NY.

March 21

Death of Stanley Sadie (b. 10/30/30, London, UK), of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, at 74. Cossington, UK. "[He was] a musicologist, writer and editor whose prodigious output included editing the last two editions of the titanic and authoritative *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. . . . Sadie had spent three weeks at a hospital in London, but was intent on returning home in time for the first concert in a music series that he and his wife run at a church near their home. The concert, on Sunday evening, was an all-Beethoven program performed by the Chilingirian String Quartet. Mr. Sadie was able to stay for the first half, but felt unwell and went home to bed. At the conclusion of the performance, the quartet went to Mr. Sadie's house, set up quietly in his bedroom, and performed the slow movement of Beethoven's *Quartet No. 16 in F* (Op. 135) as he drifted in and out of sleep. Mr. Sadie made a thriving industry of musicology, a field that most people regard as the quiet province of tweedy researchers concerned with the arcana of distant eras. He so thoroughly remade *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* -- the classic reference work, first published by Sir George Grove in 1878 -- that when its sixth edition was published in 1980, the word "New" was added to its title. Mr. Sadie had taken it from nine volumes to 20; and when the most recent edition was published in 2001, it had grown to 29 volumes, and was called the second edition of *The New Grove* rather than the seventh of *Grove*. In addition to covering the classical music world with greater depth, Mr. Sadie opened the work to articles on jazz, rock and world music. Mr. Sadie also vastly expanded the *Grove* franchise, editing not only a single-volume overview (*The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*, 1988) and a series of biographies based on articles in *The New Grove*, but also a handful of spin-off encyclopedias in which topics explored in *The New Grove* were looked at more thoroughly as independent specialties. These include *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (three volumes, 1984), *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, which Mr. Sadie edited with H. Wiley Hitchcock (four volumes, 1986), and *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (four volumes, 1992). Stanley Sadie . . . studied music at Cambridge University, where he completed a bachelor's degree in 1953, a master's in 1957 and a doctorate in 1958. . . . He taught at the Trinity College of Music, in London, from 1957 to 1965, and began his reviewing career as a critic for *The Times* of London in 1964, and for the British recordings magazine *Gramophone*, in 1965. In 1967, he was appointed editor of *The Musical Times*, an important musicological journal that he oversaw for 20 years. He began editing the sixth edition of *Grove* in 1970, and also edited a series of short biographies in the *Master Musicians* series, starting in 1976. . . . In the 1990's, Mr. Sadie and his wife, who is also a musicologist, undertook a campaign to save and preserve the house where Handel lived in the Mayfair section of London. Their efforts led to the creation of the Handel House Museum. That gave the Sadies an interest in exploring other composers' homes; in recent years they visited 300 through Europe and collaborated on a guidebook, *Calling on the Composer*. It is to be published by Yale University Press in May" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 3/23/05].

California Ear Unit in *Still Moving*. LA County Museum, CA.

John Adams conducts his *Chamber Symphony*, on a program also including his *Hallelujah Junction*, *American Berserk*, and *Road Movies*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "[T]here were moments when Chamber Symphony had more in common with Stravinsky than with either Glass or Schoenberg" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 3/23/05].

March 22

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, including the world premiere of Terry Riley's *Olde English*, with Joan Jeanrenaud. Yerba Buena, San Francisco, CA.

March 25

*Steve Reich Composer Portrait. Drumming and Sextet*. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY. Repeated March 26, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (MA).

March 27

Death of Grant Johannesen (b. 7/30/21, Salt Lake City, UT), at 83. Munich, Germany. "Johannesen was a sensitive player who was more interested in exploring musical byways that fascinated him than in repeating the war-horses of the repertory, and as a teacher, he advised his students to follow a similar path. That is not to say that he ignored the standard works entirely: throughout his six-decade career, his recital programs often included music by Bach, Beethoven or Chopin amid contemporary American works and French scores . . . . Mostly, though, his focus was on the music of Faure, Poulenc, Milhaud, Dukas, and Saint-Saens, which he played with a graceful touch and an incomparable ear for coloration and nuance. Mr. Johannesen championed American music, too. On his first tour of the Soviet Union, in 1962, his main showpiece was Wallingford Riegger's *Variations for Piano and Orchestra*, and he performed and recorded music by Copland, Mennin, Barber, Harris, and Norman Dello Joio, as well as that of earlier American composers like Edward MacDowell and Louis Moreau Gottschalk. After a performance of Gershwin's *Concerto in F* that was broadcast on the radio early in his career, Mr. Johannesen received a telegram from Duke Ellington saying that Mr. Johannesen's performance was the best Gershwin playing he had heard. More recently, Mr. Johannesen performed works by Crawford Gates, and undertook a project to publish and record the works of his first wife, Helen Taylor, who died in an automobile accident in 1950. . . .

When the French pianist Robert Casadesus gave a recital in Salt Lake City in 1939, he listened to Mr. Johannesen play and invited him to study with him at Princeton. Mr. Johannesen also studied with the pianist Egon Petri and was a composition and music student of Roger Sessions in New York and of Nadia Boulanger at her conservatory at Fontainebleau, France." [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 3/30/05].

March 28

Antares. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA. A second program is given March 29.

James Levine conducts the Boston Symphony Orchestra in John Harbison's *Darkbloom: Overture for an Imagined Opera*, Charles Wuorinen's *Piano Concerto No. 4* (with Peter Serkin), and Igor Stravinsky's *Movements*. "[Levine's] programming of tough-guy modernists like Milton Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen is not some intellectual pose. He is genuinely excited by these challenging works and is counting on his ability to entice listeners to open their ears to music he believes in. . . . Though both were born in 1938, Mr. Harbison and Mr. Wuorinen represent bastions of contemporary music that were at war during the bad old days of the 1970's. With this program, Mr. Levine was signaling that those polemical battles are dated and pointless. To consider Mr. Wuorinen a doctrinaire serialist and Mr. Harbison a Neo-Romantic holdout for tonality is to oversimplify hugely their styles and stands. . . . While it's true that in the last ten years Mr. Wuorinen had been exploring a less confrontational brand of modernism, this 25-minute concerto, structured in three sections, is still music of uncompromising complexity and intellectual rigor. Yet it was hard not to respond to the sheer intensity and brilliance of the score. . . . Whole stretches of the music are scored with the intimacy and specificity of chamber music. There are thick orchestral sonorities, sounding like 12-tone Brahms, and a passage of Ivesian atmospherics, complete with distant chimes and quivering strings. Each section builds inexorably to outburst of aggressive intensity. Yet no matter how thick the music, almost every detail is audible. Still, for all its unabashed modernism, there is something retro in Mr. Wuorinen's style. Viewed one way, the music is as dated as the tonal contemporary music that Mr. Wuorinen used to mock in his polemical writings of a generation ago. Yet the concerto kept me hooked right through. And who could resist Mr. Serkin's stunning, bracing, subtle and exciting account of the monstrously difficult piano part? Any music that inspires Peter Serkin to this kind of performance must be taken seriously. Under Mr. Levine, the Boston musicians played this score as if they were a crack contemporary music orchestra" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 3/30/05].

## Writers

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