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The Compleat Crumb / Early Edition to 1970

MARK ALBURGER

While George Crumb (b. 10/24/29) has recently been unceremoniously dropped from a standard music appreciation textbook, his music continues to inspire wonder and draw crowds, as seen at a recent concert at Sacramento State University concert, where well-wishers lined up to greet the composer and purchase CDs.

Among the latter were a number of handsome new releases by David Starobin's Bridge Records, ambitiously entitled *Complete Crumb Edition*. The eight volumes issued thus far present an overview of this important artist's handiwork – an output that will take a number of more releases to complete.

The extant issues seem to follow no discernable pattern. Indeed, it is only by Volume Four that the Complete Works moniker is evoked at all, leading one to speculate that the project grew in scope as it evolved.

By unnumbered Volume Three, a welcome early work is brought to life – *Three Early Songs* (1947) – which are not mentioned in standard reference volumes of the former century. The texts, the first by Robert Southey and latter two by Sara Teasale, manifest concerns that Crumb would later find in further explorations of Federico Garcia Lorca, such that the 18-year-old composer is definitely father to the manifest machinations of later years.

The harmony and textures are quite different. Today's auditors might find the impressionist and neoromantic tendencies prescient, as they are mixed with ostinati that could almost anticipate minimalism. Dedicated and first performed by Crumb's wife, nee Elizabeth Brown, they are sensitively sung here by the composer's daughter Ann (known to many for her roles on Broadway), with the creator competently at the pianistic helm.

Of other early works -- *String Quartet* (1954), *Sonata for Solo Cello* (1955), *Variations for Orchestra* (1959), and *Five Pieces for Piano* (1962) -- we shall look forward to future recordings.

Unnumbered Volume Two includes the revised account of the seminal *Night Music I* (1963, 1967), Crumb's first essay on texts of Federico Garcia Lorca. Comparing the 1967 Belwin Mills score to the current recording, it is not always clear exactly what has been changed. One suspects, however, that the two holds (respectively played by xylophone/marimba and celesta/marimba) separating the three "giocoso, estatico" sections in Notturmo I have been written out, as the "improvise" directives here (and in movements 2 and 4) seem fully in Crumb's personal style.

The overall arch structure is reminiscent of Bela Bartok and the predominance of instrumental (I), rather than vocal (V), sections evokes Pierre Boulez, the seven movements being IIVIVII. The John Cageian / mystical elements in "La Luna Asoma" anticipate Crumb's own *Ancient Voices of Children*, with not one, but two, circular structures, preceded by dark sustains and soprano gymnastics. The circles, however, in the spirit of an aleatory Guillaume de Machaut or W.A. Mozart, may be performed by the keyboardist and percussionists either clockwise or counter-clockwise.

This is musicians' music, at times particularly engaging when following along with the score. But there is nothing esoteric about the visceral energy in the centerpiece Notturmo IV, where the Bridge musicians (pianist/celestist Christopher Oldfather, and percussionists Daniel Druckman and James Baker) carry on with great aplomb and energy.

Soprano Susan Narucki brings a nuanced and ecstatic presence to "La Luna" and Notturmo V "Gacela de la Terrible Presencia," at times seemingly a reincarnation of Crumb interpreter par excellence Jan DeGaetani. Indeed, this seems a familiar world, with typical whole-tone and chromatic fragments already in place at this early date.

While both the *Four Nocturnes (Night Music II)* (1964) and *Echoes of Time and the River* (1967) are found on Volume Six, the intervening *Madrigals, Book I* and *Book II* (1965) and *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* (1966) must wait for later hearing.

The Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death are well represented, however, on the first unnumbered disc. This music is always a romp with dark, malevolent undertones and feelings of absolute musical madness, delivered here, not surprisingly with particular panache from electric guitarist-producer Starobin. Baritone Sanford Sylvan finds the lightness and the darkness of Crumb's Lorca muse, and if not as stentorian as the original Nonesuch recording, a worthy analog nonetheless.

The other members of Speculum Musicae (electric contrabassist Donald Palma and electric pianist/harpsichordist Aleck Karis, with Eric Charlston and Druckman at their multiple percussion posts) provide solid support and the requisite surrealist / manic-freak-show atmosphere.

With more infilling yet to come (*Madrigals Book III* and *IV*, and *Night of the Four Moons*, all from 1969), the Bridge Complete Crumb Edition is off to an impressive start.

Concert Reviews

Martino Twist

DAVID CLEARY

Tribute to Donald Martino. Fantasies and Impromptus (1978), *From the Other Side* (1988), *Notturmo* (1973), and *Piccolo Studio* (1999). November 16, 2003, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

The New England Conservatory of Music recently decided to give a concert honoring its one-time Composition Department chairman, Donald Martino. It was a most successful evening of music spanning over twenty-five years of his accomplished output.

Fantasies and Impromptus (1978) is one of three multi-movement character piece collections for piano solo written by this composer. But it not only makes sense as a set of short movements; the various divisions clump convincingly into a large-scale ternary construct further tracing an overlaid narrative curve, with climax material achieved approximately two-thirds through the cycle. Keyboard writing is both idiomatic and convincing, exploring a wide variety of textures and moods. In short, it's a winning kaleidoscope solidly structured.

The word "piccolo" in *Piccolo Studio* (1999) refers not to the tiny fife but to the duration of this alto sax solo selection. Though brief, it's packed with contrasts expertly harnessed to yet another narrative curve shape. And melodic material speaks eloquently here. Though little, it's no lightweight.

The rest of the program was devoted to two of Martino's finest utterances for mixed chamber ensemble. While containing its share of sturdy gravity, the mixed quartet *From the Other Side* (1988) can be seen as a worthy example of the divertimento genre. Tangos, jazz idioms, and cabaret burlesques of Second Viennese School classics pervade the tissues of this delightful yet substantial opus.

Numerous works have been written for Pierrot ensemble with added percussion during the last sixty years or so. Your reviewer's nomination for the best of all such compositions is *Notturmo* (1973). The piece speaks in evocative, dramatic gestures that catch the ear and won't let go. Its virtuosic instrumental writing never sounds forced or strenuous. Structurally, its overarching three-part edifice is tight and sturdy, featuring convincing use of extended techniques in the work's ghostly midsection. Not every Pulitzer Prize winning work stands up to repeated hearings -- but this one does, and gloriously so.

Performances were excellent. Randall Hodgkinson, the only non-student executant heard this evening, reveled in bringing out all the color and vibrancy in *Fantasies and Impromptus* without letting things become diffuse. His digital technique and pedaling were superb and his voice delineation was impeccable. Student saxophonist Eliot Gattegno's rendition of *Piccolo Studio* was forthright, energetic, and well paced. The youngsters who gave *Other Side* and *Notturmo* (the former coached by John Heiss, the latter conducted by Donald Palma) put forth first-rate presentations -- sufficiently good to rival seasoned pros, in fact.

Credo in US Composers

DAVID CLEARY

Credo in (US Composers): Boston Musica Viva. John Cage's *Credo in US* (1942); Michael Gandolfi's *Budget Cuts* (1996) Charles Ives's *Five Street Songs* (1894-1920) (arr. Richard Pittman; and the world premiere of Ezra Sims's *Musing and Reminiscence* (2003). November 21, 2003, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

This most recent Boston Musica Viva concert was intriguingly constructed, dividing its program between living local composers and long deceased American icons of the prior century. For the most part, it was a fine evening to experience.

Both selections by Boston-based tonemeisters pleased greatly. The mixed quintet *Musing and Reminiscence* (2003) by Ezra Sims is a gentle *Heldenleben*, employing thematic material from earlier work by this microtonal master and resulting in an entity that proves eloquent, reflective, and substantive. Its three variation-like main sections cleverly elaborate upon a simple duet passage that appears both at the back and front of the piece.

Sadly, the ideological and fiscal ills savaged by Michael Gandolfi's *Budget Cuts* (1996), composed during the height of Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America," are if anything more acutely with us seven years on. Its three movements are a clueless efficiency expert's dream gone deservedly awry. The opener, for example, arranges snatches from several common practice period orchestral chestnuts for its piano, percussion, and violin/viola trio, in the process making them sound as heinously stupid as possible -- a first-rate *Musical Joke* for our time. And the central movement requires its players and conductor to double on instruments not normally considered reasonable adjuncts. Shades of the infamous Portsmouth Sinfonia! *Budget Cuts* is a real hoot, losing none of its snarling bite with time.

Gandolfi's process-music leanings nicely echoed the fabric of the ostinato-laden *Credo in US* (1942) by John Cage. Scored for pianist, two percussionists, and CD machine operator, this opus puts forth an appealingly energetic, jaunty persona that would seem to assure its effectiveness in its original incarnation as a dance underscore. Structurally, it's a bit less convincing than other items by this composer, but by and large this is a pleasing, engaging listen, filled with humorous allusions to jazz and standard orchestral literature.

The program closed with conductor Richard Pittman's arrangement of five Charles Ives vocal works (by far the best known of which was "The Circus Band") for soprano, Pierrot ensemble, and percussion, presented under the title *Five Street Songs* (1894-1920). Pittman's recasting was professional, euphonious, and polished—in fact, one might argue, a bit too much so. Given that the harmonic language of these five songs is tonally conservative and texts wax nostalgic, might this full fleshing-out of the original piano backings be seen as something that appeals to the sort of "soft eared Rollo" Ives detested? It's an aesthetic conundrum to be sure, one your reviewer could not easily solve. Still, any Ives is always better than none.

Performances were top-flight. Soprano Elizabeth Keusch sang *Street Songs* with a penetrating high register, solid midrange, and decent diction. Pittman's fine directing elicited inspired playing from this always reliable ensemble. And special kudos go to pianist Geoffrey Burleson violinist/violist Krista Buckland Reisner, percussionist Robert Schulz, and Pittman for their convincing, non-self-conscious theatrical deportment in the Gandolfi, imparting the ideal amount of irony and humor to the overall proceedings.

Despite a half-and-half programming approach, this was no half-baked affair. Much enjoyed.

Last Picture Show

DAVID CLEARY

The Composers' Series Presents -- Last Picture Show: Music of Robert Ceely. February 3, 2004, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

This tribute concert, presented on the occasion of Robert Ceely's retirement from the New England Conservatory, contained a chronologically wide-ranging clutch of this composer's music that proved both splendid and unusual. Why unusual? Three reasons: most of the works were for acoustic instruments, were couched in a less spiky harmonic idiom, and were brief or consisting of brief movements.

Ceely is one of America's finest practitioners of electronic music; given this, it was surprising to see only one such selection, *Frames* (1978), on the program. It's a great listen, too—cheeky, ebullient, vibrantly multi-colored, cast in an imaginatively etched two-part structure. Also exhibiting binary form (both halves linked by a brief woodwind cadenza), *Giostra* (1984) imparts good variety to its disjunct oboe/piano writing, pushing the music through lyric or aggressive landscapes with ease. *Fanfare (0125) for Brass Quintet* (1992) neatly smooths its tightly concentrated clangor with sly touches of heraldic demonstrativeness and neoclassical chatter. And the solo piano work *Extensions* (2000) expertly morphs its pointillist basis idiom into something keenly aware of linear logic and cogency. Neither this nor any of the aforementioned items exhibit the "dry as dust" dictum some feel must automatically come with non-triadic compositions.

The two vocal selections heard, *Five Contemplative Pieces for Chorus* (2000) and *Two Songs* (2003) for baritone and piano, while perhaps more dissonant sounding than many items for such forces, were even more obviously scalar oriented than anything else encountered this evening. The latter partakes of syllabic voice writing and restless keyboard accompaniment figures without seeming tortuous. And Ceely nicely delineates a broad range of emotional shadings within the choral work's overall pensive tone; its predominantly linear textures, while madrigal-like, contain several luscious resultant verticals.

Two worthy examples of early Ceely were also encountered. *Modules for Septet* (1968), while the grittiest, most fractured opus heard, ably tempers its flinty sonics with aleatoric procedures, colorful hues, and persuasive unfolding. A student work, the *String Trio* (1953) sounds like nothing else from this composer's pen. Found here are pure, pellucid melodic ideas and a sound world notably perfumed with wafts of Stravinsky, Bartok, and Webern; this trio's expressive slow movement is Ceely's only foray into serialism. Both are strong listens, not dull juvenilia.

Rounding things off were brief homage works from former students Dan Bassin, Joe Johnson, and David Rakowski composed specially for the occasion.

Performances, many involving New England Conservatory students, were extremely good, dedicated to bringing out the artistic and linear virtues contained in Ceely's sometimes rugged exteriors. Special citations go to pianist Shen Wen, singer Brian Church, oboist Jennifer Slowik, and conductors Jason Sabol and Jeremy Kember for particularly noteworthy contributions.

As retirement gifts go, concerts such as this beat a gold watch and testimonial rubber chicken lunch any day. Bravo to Ceely and his players for a top-notch presentation.

Contemporary Contrabass

DAVID CLEARY

Alea III: The Contemporary Contrabass. February 4, 2004, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Groundhog Day (February 2) is a time when a below-ground-dwelling critter traditionally pokes its head out into the daytime and plays weather prognosticator, by its actions forecasting whether spring is on the way or more hard winter days are in store. The contrabass is the string section's subterranean member and, on February 4's *Alea III* concert, it got a chance to bask in the spotlight courtesy of Edwin Barker's performing talents.

Of the four works encountered, the only solo opus heard was Tom Johnson's *Failing* (1975). This wonderful piece is arguably the most endearing -- and enduring -- utterance to emanate from the post-1960's Downtown New York scene. The soloist here is required to play a fetching melodic line of gradually increasing difficulty while speaking a lengthy monologue (both humorous and reflective) that addresses success and failure and the philosophical influences thereof. Unlike some other such works, verbal and musical aspects both mesh perfectly and stand alone well.

Music for Double Basses (2003) by Samuel Headrick, while scored for eight bull fiddles, configures its performers in unusual fashion. Here, one player is the soloist while the rest form an accompanying entity sectioned off into a trio plus a quartet. The work's two interlinked movements respectively traffic in neoclassic vim and elegiac expression. Written as a memorial tribute to recently deceased Boston University musicologist John Daverio, the finale is particularly lovely.

The other two selections, *Concerto for Double Bass and Chamber Orchestra* (1987) by James Yannatos and *Concertino for Contrabass and Percussion Ensemble* (2000) by Theodore Antoniou, share similar traits. Both possess three-movement fast-slow-fast layouts, with busily bustling outer sections surrounding soulfully warm centerpieces. Thanks to its more consistent harmonic language, tighter structural sense, more thorough internalization of influences, and more focused manner of speech, the Antoniou proved the stronger listen.

Barker's playing was absolutely top-drawer, filled with clean digital technique, splendid linear shaping, and a sound both warm and penetrating. Conductor Antoniou drew solidly secure backing from the ensemble.

Although the contrabass may not be able to forecast the weather, with Barker at the helm, one can confidently predict a wonderful listening experience to come. Greatly enjoyed from this corner.

The Circumference of Radius

DAVID CLEARY

Radius Ensemble. February 7, Edward M. Pickman Concert Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

The Radius Ensemble is a Boston-based chamber music presenter founded five years ago that devotes a noteworthy portion of its programming to repertoire written in the last 100 years. February 7 saw this intrepid bunch perform three contemporary music selections.

Of these, the oldest and most tightly built example was Irving Fine's *Partita* for wind quintet. While resolutely neoclassical in ethos—its five movements bearing such subtitles as “Gigue” and “Introduction and Theme”—there are no slavish kowtows to hoary forms or Stravinskian style peccadilloes. Fine co-opts classic procedures as a springboard for imaginative flights of fancy. And melodies and textures are personal to its composer. In short, Fine is fine indeed. Flutist Orlando Cela, oboist / artistic director Jennifer Montbach, clarinetist Eran Egozy, bassoonist Sally Merriman, and French hornist Anne Howarth put forth a dubious ensemble balance at times, but otherwise played the piece ably; sound quality and rhythmic execution were appealingly vigorous.

Garden of Joys and Sorrows by Sofia Gubaidulina and *Insult to Injury* by Curtis K. Hughes both made “all over the place” a virtue instead of a shortcoming. The latter's two movements sport architecture both satisfying and unconventional 00 unique, risky, and utterly successful. Gritty dissonance, octave passages, ersatz Irish jigs, and ostinato textures coexist surprisingly well within an emotional world that is bleak but not depressing. Violinist Biliana Voutchkova and pianist Sarah Bob gave it a terrific, hard-hitting presentation. In her work, Gubaidulina builds a remarkably cogent and viable edifice from three disparate ideas: a supple opening flute melody marginally tonal in focus, trill/tremolo gestures in the harp, and “Reveille”-like triadic harmonics from the viola. While an overall narrative curve shape is traced, there's plenty of breathing room for the music to explore fascinating byways during unfolding. It's powerful, vital stuff. Flautist Cela, joined by violist Annette Klein, harpist Franziska Huhn, and narrator Robin Young performed wonderfully well, never allowing this mercurial opus to seem scattered or ill-considered.

Judging from this concert, the Radius Ensemble is a most welcome addition to Beantown's new music roster of worthies. Here's hoping they'll be providing comparable listening joys to local audiences for years to come.

Portland Short

DAVID CLEARY

Portland Symphony Orchestra. February 8, Merrill Auditorium, Portland, ME.

February 8, 2004 saw the Portland Symphony Orchestra perform *Symphony: Winter Lightning* (1984) by Jeffrey Jacob with the composer at the piano. "Symphony," not "concerto" proves the correct designation for the work, as its keyboard part, while challenging, is neither pervasive enough nor prominent enough to truly be the engine to drive a soloist's vehicle. It's an attractive New Tonalist selection that exhibits a nicely developed ear for large ensemble timbres. The harmonic language echoes that of Ravel and Holst, though the widespread if unobtrusive use of ostinati and frequent employment of long-spun melodic material keep this far distant from style-study land. Jacob's pianism was first-rate, featuring tasteful pedaling, clean finger work, and a tone quality perfectly combining presence and richness. The orchestra, led expertly by Toshiyuki Shimada, performed masterfully. Special kudos go to violinist Charles Dimmick and cellist James Kennedy for fine playing in exposed passages.

Lumen Illuminates

DAVID CLEARY

Lumen Contemporary Music Ensemble. March 21, Pleasant Street Congregational Church, Arlington, MA.

Perhaps the most reclusive of Boston's composer consortium groups, the Lumen Contemporary Music ensemble, now in its 14th year, features music by members Stuart Jones, Armand Qualliotine, James Ricci, Betsy Schramm, and Pasquale Tassone. All write music descending from the East Coast school of thought and show a solid command of craft. Because of a prior commitment, your reviewer had to catch up with their most recent concert via CD recording.

Music by Qualliotine and Tassone proved especially effective. The former's solo viola work *Er kuesst sie lange auf die Augen* (2003) and saxophone/piano duo *The Love Feast of the Fireflies* (2002) both possess evocatively rich and idiomatic instrumental writing, carefully burnished linear ideas, and convincing yet non-prescriptive architecture. Both carve out a compelling and unique voice within a dissonant ethos. Tassone's two selections, *Five Intimate Pieces* (2003), also for sax/keyboard pairing, and *Nexus VI* (2003) for alto flute solo, show preference for older formats, respectively the miniature character piece set and ternary with coda. Happily, Tassone is not content to use these as creaky crutches, finding imaginative ways to express these concepts within his clangorous sonic palette of choice. *Nexus VI* takes full advantage of its instrument's deliciously dark tones, while *Intimate Pieces* employs an unusual large-scale organizational schema in its five brief movements. Both pleased much.

The solo viola *Sonatina* (2000) was the more successful of James Ricci's pair of offerings. Its sonata-like format is cleverly expressed, while the string writing is emotive, showy, and telling--a fine listen. Despite an earnest manner of speech, Ricci's *Three Pieces for Piano* (1999) seems too much in awe of the Expressionist keyboard masterworks of Arnold Schoenberg and Ricci's teachers, Donald Martino and Martin Boykan, to express a true sense of self. Credit Betsy Schramm with both solid ambition and able workmanship in her cantata *The Second Coming* (2004) for tenor soloist, three female singers, and mixed instrumental quartet. However, a work endeavoring to set prayers from four religions as well as the title poem of William Butler Yeats demands music of cosmic depth. For all its craft and sincerity, *Second Coming* somehow lacks the special weight and resonance its texts demand.

Also appearing was a partial presentation of a multi-composer bagatelle collection for marimba duo entitled *Time Suite* (2003). Perhaps most notable for containing what is likely the last selection penned by the late John Lessard, it also features contributions from Qualliotine, Jones, Dominic Donato, and David Rakowski. If anything, the piece benefits from such a plethora of approaches, keeping the marimba writing from seeming too much the same, as can happen in sizeable single-composer works for this instrument.

Performances were generally good, with particularly strong efforts from pianist John McDonald, saxophonist Kenneth Radnovsky, alto flutist Jill Dreeben, violist Wouter Schmidt, tenor Martin Thomson, and marimbists Donato and Stephen Paysen.

The best items encountered here suggest that Lumen need not be so shy about promoting itself. Much to like, and much enjoyed.

Longitude on the Map

DAVID CLEARY

Longitude. April 27, 2004, Edward M. Pickman Concert Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

April 27's concert by Longitude consisted of three obscure works by well-known names and a trio of items by lesser-knowns. While not every piece was a winner, there were enough worthy listens to tempt an audience.

Fare by two of the more obscure composers proved particularly pleasing. *The Walls of Morlais Castle* (2000), a mixed trio by Hilary Tann, deftly outlines an arch-like structure in which later sections superimpose the work's two primary ideas. These materials, respectively plaintive and restless, prove highly evocative and compelling. And the composition's harmonic language, tonal with leanings towards Bartok-style feistiness, is confidently handled. Paul Brust's *Elegiac* (1989), scored for soprano and mixed quintet, was originally commissioned by the Alea III ensemble. Despite employing an Expressionist East Coast sonic universe, the vocal writing is excellently idiomatic and accompaniment textures are bracingly lucid. Dramatic and eloquent, it's a fine listen.

By far the best utterance from an established composer this evening, Thea Musgrave's flute/oboe duet *Impromptu No. 1* (1967) plows a convincing furrow traversing both serial pitch organization and free rhythmic notation. Melodic writing is fetching and architecture is both natty and non-standard.

The sins of the *Duo for Flute and Piano* (1961) by John Harbison can be chalked up to its fledgling composer's groping to find a suitable style. His melding of Stravinskian neo-classicism and dodecaphonic pitch organization, infused with dollops of jazz, seems inelegantly forced -- though the attractive manner of speech suggests good things for the future. For solo piano, Sofia Gubaidulina's clangorous, grimly intense *Chaconne* (1962) comes across as plodding, too shackled by this format's sectional nature to allow the music to breathe. And *Lyric Trio* (1983) by Kathryn Hoover regrettably incorporates not only Hindemith's block-like rhythms and Milhaud's polytonal harmonies but also the former's stodginess and the latter's superficiality.

Performances were fine, with special citations due for the vital readings of the Tann (oboist Susetta Dunn-Rockett, violist Roy Rudolph, and cellist Thomas Kraines), Gubaidulina (pianist Paul Jacobs), and Brust (conducted by its composer).

Mining in out-of-the-way places doesn't always produce veins of ore -- but in this case, ensemble director Brust and his charges were able to unearth some sizeable nuggets of listening pleasure. Received with thanks.

Straight Outta Package

DAVID CLEARY

Fresh Out of the Package: Premieres of Ear and Eye, with the Auros Group for New Music. May 1 Edward M. Pickman Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

This concert by the Auros Group for New Music consisted entirely of material by young, up-and-coming tonemeisters—a risky proposition, as several such folks are a few years away from producing truly worthy material. Fortunately, the ensemble chose well; in fact, this proved to be one of the best Boston-area new music events of the 2003-04 concert season.

La Farfalla Verde (1002) by Armand Qualliotine takes its aesthetic cue from the supple, scrumptious sound of the bass flute, the focal instrument of this mixed quintet. Qualliotine infuses a wealth of color, contrast, and vim within the work's low-key ethos. Its narrative curve architecture is imaginatively delineated. And the harmonic language employed finds a nicely considered balance between tonal focus and spikier verticals. Far more clangorous was Jason Eckardt's amplified wind quartet *16* (2003), a compelling selection more vibrant than a hive full of honeybees in mid sugar rush. It's a pleasure to report that all its jittery energy and pervasive use of extended techniques is imaginatively harnessed in service to a sturdy binary structure outlining two large crescendos.

Little in Sean Heim's *When Wind Comes to Spare Bamboo* (1995) suggests things Oriental—in fact, its solo alto sax line seems more correctly a mating of jazz and Hebrew influences. But this is no reflection on the piece itself, an ardent, enjoyable cantilena tellingly littered with pitch bends and microtones. *Suite: Eight Haiku* by Richard Wright (2001) finds its composer, Judah Adashi, capturing the subtle emotive nature of this Japanese poetic format in a non-vocal environment. Scored for violin/marimba duo, it's a personable, engaging opus with enough serious undercurrents to impart depth. And despite nods to Messiaen and Stravinsky, the sonic universe sounds fully personal.

Derek Bermel is to be congratulated for making his mixed quartet *Language Instruction* (2003) a splendidly effective example of the theatre piece genre. The "plot," a clever send-up of classroom teaching, brims with perfectly timed humor without using dialogue—nothing is obscure or overstays its welcome. Best of all, there's musical as well as dramatic logic at work here. One can imagine successfully perceiving the work on a purely aural level without visual cues.

From the usual welter of fine performances by Auros's members, one should especially mention Susan Gall's fine flute playing in the Eckardt and Qualliotine, saxophonist Demetrius Spaneas's emotive yet controlled presentation of the Heim, the spirited rendition of the Adashi by violinist Gregory Vitale and marimba player Aya Kaminaguchi, and the delightfully paced antics of clarinetist William Kirkley, violinist Christine Vitale, cellist Jennifer Lucht, and pianist Nina Ferrigno in the Bermel.

Next!

DAVID CLEARY

Next: Next: Boston Modern Orchestra Project. May 21, 2004, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA

The program for this concert bore the cryptic title "Next," without further elaboration. It proved to be a series of selections by some of America's most notable mid-career tonemeisters and was almost without exception a must-hear event.

Three of the five entries showed modest kinship to process/ostinato idioms. In *Sky Above Clouds* (1989) by Elena Ruehr, such figures serve as a subtle background motor around which melodies and fragments seductively hover; low-key use of shifting meters and phrasing keep the music from becoming stodgy. Its cunning orchestration, inventively expressed narrative curve shape, and felicitous handling of Americana-inspired tonality stamp it as a winner. In Stephen Hartke's *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra "Landscapes with Blues"* (2001), patterned figures take a back seat to an ethos skillfully cannibalizing jazz, blues, and ethnic styles into something inimitably Hartke. By and large tonally focused with some thickening discords, it's an irresistible listen that expertly evokes suave, soulful, and jaunty moods. And while lengthy, its somewhat sprawling feel seems hot-climate relaxed, not thoughtlessly careless. By far the most unusual entry heard, *War Chant* (2004) by Evan Ziporyn lacks the others' overall architectural integrity but still has its merits. Uniquely colorful scoring is only the most obvious manifestation of this composer's desire to create a piece that dreams beyond the ordinary. Tonally derived harmonies neatly incorporate glissandi and microtones, and unfolding of material takes many surprising twists.

While *Persistent Memory* (1997) by David Rakowski and *Aurora* (2000) by Augusta Read Thomas have East Coast roots, neither proves anything but wonderful to hear. Rakowski's two movements delineate ternary and variation formats without a hint of stuffiness. The sturdy material is handled here with crafty inspiration, its masterful spinning of seamless counterpoint being only the most obvious manifestation. And while textures are often full, there's never a dense or clogged measure. In her work for piano and chamber orchestra, Read Thomas breaks all the rules of concerto writing and still comes out on top. The keyboard more often than not busies itself with textural and punctuation ideas, letting the ensemble assume center stage. The coda's preoccupation with newly entering soprano and bells may feel jarring to some. But this ethereal ending seems like a natural, if unusual, outgrowth of earlier melodic lines and ringing-point sounds. And the pianist gets a sufficient share of focus, especially in the various brief cadenzas, so that one can truly call this a soloist's vehicle. Like all this composer's work, forms are compellingly expressed and scoring is vibrant. Fine works both.

Gil Rose led his excellent ensemble with unmistakable skill, featuring a meticulous ear for balance and detail. Pianist Ursula Oppens and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman showed why they are among today's pre-eminent soloists in their respective fields. Scintillating finger work and round, hall-filling sound were the order of the day from both. From the orchestra, soprano Kendra Colton and French hornist Neil DeLand contributed memorably in exposed passages.

So if "Next" here is meant as a synonym for "essential event," your reviewer heartily concurs.

Taking Stock in Brockton

DAVID CLEARY

Brockton Symphony Orchestra Chamber Series. September 19, War Memorial Building Hall, Brockton, MA.

The last few years have seen the Brockton Symphony Orchestra present one or two chamber music concerts as an adjunct to their usual symphonic fare. This season, they have decided to offer a full slate of six such events as a self-sufficient chamber music series.

If September 19's initial installation proves typical, this will be an exceptionally welcome addition to Brockton's cultural life.

Founded in 1997 and currently Ensemble-in-Residence at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, featured group Vento Chiaro (an Italian phrase meaning "clear wind") lived up to its name in a big way. Despite performing in the rather echoic confines of the War Memorial Building Hall, this woodwind quintet paid scrupulous heed to clean ensemble playing. Not a musical hair was mussed during the entire program.

And the fivesome's upside didn't end there. Spotless finger work, sensitive linear phrasing, crisp accents, and a thoughtfully blended tone quality that never obscured main melodies contributed to an ideal listening experience. Flautist Joanna Goldstein, oboist Ana-Sofia Campesino, clarinetist Michelle Doyle-Ronkin, bassoonist Ellen Barum, and French hornist Jason White gave exposed passages with assurance and sensitivity.

Their roster of works was engaging, if heavily slanted towards arrangements, including perky versions of Leonard Bernstein's *Overture to "Candide"* and excerpts from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, by Maurice Ravel.

Of the two items specifically penned for this grouping, David Maslanka's *Quintet for Winds No. 3* (1999) proved to be a substantive new addition to the wind player's literature. It makes imaginative use of sacred melodies -- with and without traditional harmonizations -- to build its three sturdy movements. And unlike some recent triadic works, there isn't a hint of preciousness or self-parody here. Maslanka produces intense, tough-fibered music that deserves the listener's attention and respect.

It is heartening to see a chamber series blossom in Brockton, especially one that has the foresight to attract players as worthy as those of Vento Chiaro. Here's hoping it enjoys a long, distinguished run.

Leroy Memorial

DAVID CLEARY

Leroy Southers Memorial Concert. September 27, 2004, David Friend Recital Hall, Berklee College of Music, Boston, MA.

This concert of music by the Berklee College composition faculty was a pleasing, respectful tribute to a recently fallen comrade. Leroy Southers, who died suddenly of a heart attack in December 2003 at age 62, was a tonemeister of Neoclassicism who was well remembered for his encyclopedic knowledge of classical pieces and their recordings. His *Five Aphorisms* for flute and piano, which kicked off the evening's second half, are well-argued miniatures well worth revisiting. If this work is any indication, Southers's take on neoclassicism is spikier and more contrapuntally oriented than most. Here, rhythms are malleable, harmonies have grit, canonic writing is frequent, and forms are non-standardized.

As one might expect, most of the other music heard was brief and elegiac in nature. Beth Denisch's *Motherwell Lorca's Bagpipe Lament* was particularly memorable, a sturdy solo piano item that layers Highland embellishment onto late Debussy-like austerity. *Remembering Leroy*, for clarinet/piano duet, shows Andrew List starting off like Ravel and becoming grumpier by the measure—one should add, to excellent effect.

One could subtitle Marti Epstein's *Six Small Pieces for Woodwind Quintet* "when Morty met Arnie." It's a personal viewing of Schoenberg's Opus 19 piano pieces through Epstein's Feldman-tinted glasses. More dissonant and compact than much of her oeuvre, it can stand unapologetically beside its composer's best utterances. For solo oboe, the four brief movements of *Piccola Collana* by Armand Qualliotine pointedly show that disjunct linear writing can also be warm, eloquent, and eminently likable.

Perhaps the most ambitious piece on the program, *Phaedo* by Arnold Friedman encompasses a sizable single movement roughly outlining a slow introduction-fast main body format. Fortunately, the structure of this mixed quintet is not traditional in detail and the harmonies, while scalar, do not lack imagination. It's a strong, effective listen. The *Two Songs* of Harry Chalmiers discover an unusual midpoint between the France of Stravinsky/Ravel and the America of Rorem/Barber. Here, poetry of Yeats and Stafford are pleasantly set for soprano voice with keyboard backing.

Less memorable were Rich Applin's oboe/piano pairing *Song of the High Wind* (a 19th-century style study) and Yakov Gubanov's *Farewell Music* for cello solo (a too-obsessive meditation on fifths falling by half step).

Not every performance was good, but the best were laudable. Special mention should be made of flutist Carl Riley, oboist Barbara LaFitte, clarinetist Peter Cokkinias, cellist Sebastian Baverstam, and pianists Tamara Medoyeva, Epstein, and Gubanov.

Congratulations to all concerned on an able tribute to a much-beloved composer who will be sorely missed.

Collage Gems

DAVID CLEARY

Collage New Music. October 17, 2004. Walsh Theater, Suffolk University, Boston MA

The Collage New Music group's season opener concerned itself with composers at opposite ends of the age spectrum. Two elder statesmen offered up first-rate song cycles, while the rest of the program featured music by two teenagers and a college student.

Co-winners of the ensemble's latest young composer competition, Sebastian Chang's *Resurrection* and Zachary Bernstein's *Star Music* are scored for piano trio and were written in 2004. Both items demonstrate respectable craft and an earnest manner of speech that belies the fledgling status of their creators. Promising starts both. Montserrat Torras, a doctoral student at New England Conservatory and Collage's composer-in-residence for this year, was represented by a flute/piano duo *Three Movements for Sarah* (2003). Persian, Spanish, North Indian, French, and avant-garde elements insinuate themselves into the work's pages. Truth be told, this plethora of influences proves a little too wide ranging to mingle successfully, but one should also positively note Torras's effective feel for color and felicitous unfolding of material.

Both aging tonemeisters furnished infrequently encountered older pieces from their portfolios. Mario Davidovsky's *Biblical Songs* (1990) for soprano and Pierrot ensemble are dramatic and very appealing. Strong risks are taken in text setting here; moods suggested by the accompaniments sometimes seem rather at odds with the words, one example being the rather bouncy music underscoring Samson's boast of slaying thousands with the jawbone of an ass. But these apparent incongruities work surprisingly well, not appearing at all to be eccentric miscalculations. *On This Most Voluptuous Night* (1982) shows Yehudi Wyner setting William Carlos Williams's spare poetry to full bodied music of much personality, profile, and depth. Total and atonal idioms are neatly straddled here without seeming inelegant. And vernacular influences add tasty spice to this complex, delicious stew of a piece.

Performances were excellent throughout. David Hoose directed the Wyner and Davidovsky with a perceptive ear for color, texture, and mood. Among the players appearing, one can cite violinist Catherine French, flutist Christopher Krueger, cellist Joel Moerschel, and pianist Christopher Oldfather for particularly memorable efforts. Ilana Davidson's voice was warm and light, less forceful than that of many sopranos, but demonstrated an appealing agility and nuance. Her diction was mainly all right.

Clearly, we had at this event the musical equivalent of the best baseball teams, a worthy balance of veterans and rookies. Accomplished, thought-provoking, and enjoyable indeed.

Happy Birthday, Bernard Rands

DAVID CLEARY

Happy Birthday, Bernard! Auros Group for New Music. October 23, 2004. Edward M. Pickman Recital Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA

The Auros ensemble's first concert of the season, celebrating Bernard Rands's 70th birthday, focused on this composer's less frequently encountered shorter works. It showed that Rands, besides being a first-rate handler of more expansive formats, is a gifted miniaturist.

Two examples from the composer's *Memo* series stood out prominently on the program. *Memo 4* (1997) asks its solo flautist to navigate waters both intense and contrast-laden—challenging from both a technical and interpretive level. Its narrative curve based shape is cleverly expressed, requiring sensitivity in pacing to delineate balance. In a discerning performer's hands, it's an arresting listen.

With its theatrical elements and often non-syntactical text setting, *Memo 7* (2000) demonstrates kinship to Luciano Berio's solo vocal works. But this piece for soprano alone is no lazy copy—Rands's fingerprints in this striking opus are unmistakable.

For solo piano, *Tre Espressioni* (1960) is one of its composer's last student-era utterances, and like much cutting edge music from the mid-20th century, shows fascination with pointillist serialism (though in this case, shot through with aleatoric modifications). But even here, Rands thinks musically, not didactically: there's a well-developed sense of linear unfolding in the work's manner of speech that makes it anything but a drab artifact.

Like Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, Rands's *Scherzi* (1974) is scored for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. But there, the similarities end—*Scherzi* is tight, witty, no-nonsense stuff that leaves the listener perfectly satisfied, not Thanksgiving-day bloated. Writing, while angular, is deft and polished, and forms, while intuitive, are convincing.

Rands's wife, Augusta Read Thomas, showed equal skill in delineating small forms in *...a circle around the sun...* (2000) for piano trio. Its slow introduction-fast main body layout is evocative without being derivative, loaded with energetic material that ably references the intricate rhythms of East Coast styles and the mildly Impressionist/jazzy sounds of sonorities peppered with thirds.

Performances were terrific. Susan Gall's flute playing in *Memo 4* was confident and well-controlled, featuring a big, round tone and scintillating technique. Pianist Nina Ferrigno brought out the inherent horizontal logic behind *Tre Espressioni*'s prickly surface, all the while imparting sonic beauty from end to end. And Janna Baty was no less than inspired throughout *Memo 7*, sporting fine diction, spot-on stage presence, and a huge voice that resonated tellingly regardless of register. Catherine French (violin), William Kirkley (clarinet), and Jennifer Lucht (cello) rounded out the evening's roster of worthies.

Fine music splendidly presented—yes, this was a birthday party to savor. Excellent work all around.

Muiltiverses

DAVID CLEARY

Multiverses. November 3, 2004. Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA

Going to a concert the evening after a bitterly divisive Election Day proved necessary not only from an aesthetic but also a therapeutic standpoint. Fortunately, this event satisfied on all possible counts.

Pozzi Escot's *String Quartet No. 4 ("Jubilation")* (1991) possesses the brevity of Webern and ferocity of Varèse without echoing either composer. Its first three movements tellingly outline simple ideas while the finale deftly combines elements of all that came before. Her *Clarinet Concerto* (2004) uses only six players to back the soloist and makes good use of subtle variance in what might otherwise be a too-uniform backing. Clarinet writing here is raw, yet idiomatic. And like the *Quartet*, this piece demonstrates that conciseness is a virtue.

Like all of Robert Cogan's work, *Utterances for Solo Voice* (1977-) and *CelanPortrait/Celan Portrait* (2004) liberally employ indeterminacy and exist in various guises. These versions proved especially enjoyable to hear. Despite superficial similarities to Luciano Berio's solo vocal items, *Utterances* puts forth a unique personality that engages greatly. And the latter work, a setting of Holocaust-inspired poetry by Paul Celan scored for soprano and piano, is not unrelentingly monochromatic—there's tremendous variety and nuance imparted to the overall anguished feel. It's riveting, arresting stuff.

Spins (2004), a solo viola opus, showed Matthias Truniger sharing Escot's compact manner of expression. Gruff, warm, and skittish ideas tumble together effectively without seeming haphazard or jarring—a tight and tasteful tour-de-force of organization. Singer/composer Panaiotis opened the program with his *Conversation Piece* (1989) for vocalist alone. Its two sections are delineated by how the solo voice is treated: first traditionally executed while the performer strolls through the audience, later intoned into a microphone and electronically altered while the singer stands onstage. There's a certain West Coast ambient feel to the work's single-mindedness and leisurely unfolding. Happily, it doesn't even come close to wearing out its welcome.

Performances were excellent throughout. Violist Jessica Bodner performed *Spins* with full-throated confidence. Members of the Second Instrumental Unit (David Fulmer, Nathan Schmidt, Bodner, and Joseph Kuipers) put forth all the gutsy energy contained in Escot's *Quartet*. Eric Hewitt expertly led the Callithumpian Consort through a sensitively conceived presentation of Escot's *Clarinet Concerto*, furnishing the ideal platform for Michael Norsworthy's excellently shaped and controlled lines. Of the singers, Joan Heller exhibited flexible technique, a refined sound, and well-executed diction in the pair of Cogan works (intrepidly backed by pianist Jon Sakata in the Celan cycle), while Panaiotis's splendid enunciation and wildly flexible instrument (including a stunning ability to sing long chains of patter seemingly without taking a breath) perfectly suited his own composition.

While folks may not see eye to eye on politics, anyone with a perceptive mind and pair of ears will agree that Cogan, Escot, and company presented a winning concert.



Chronicle

April 3

Marin Symphony in Juraj Filas's *Trombone Concerto* ("*Don Chisciotte o un autoritratto*"). Veterans Auditorium, San Rafael, CA. "[Filas's *Trombone Concerto*] takes Don Quixote as its starting point, in the form of soloist Joseph Alessi, who triumphs over the forces of materialism not with a lance but a slide. The music slip-slides its way through a variety of appealing and memorable melodies -- martial, tender, and chromatic -- doing battle with traditional form in its two movements, but ultimately returning to its point of origin. If the piece never slips into a groove for very long, all the better for the knight in shining brass to demonstrate various magical feats of derring do" [Mark Alburger, *Commuter Times*, 4/8/05].

April 4

Xtet. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

April 7

Augusta Read Thomas. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY.

Philadelphia Orchestra in the American premiere of James MacMillan's *Symphony No. 3* ("*Silence*"). Verizon Hall, Philadelphia, PA. Through April 12, Carnegie Hall (New York, NY).

April 8

Joseph Pehrson's *Black and Jill*, presented by the American Festival of Microtonal Music. Harrison Pianos, New York, NY. "This piece is in an unusual scale of 21 notes (called 'Blackjack') which closely emulates 'just intonation' or pure music with no beating of tones" [Joseph Pehrson].

April 10

NACUSA Composers and Friends, including Anne Baldwin's *Szechuan Suite*, Sondra Clark's *Island Delights*, and Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *One of Nature's Majesties*. Foothill Presbyterian Church, San Jose, CA.

April 11

North/South Chamber Orchestra in music of Stefania de Kenessey. Christ and St. Stephen's Church, New York, NY.

April 16

Schoenberg's *Septet Suite*. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY.

April 17

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

April 24

Michael Sahl's *Sally Anne*. Flea Theater, New York, NY.

April 27

Brian Ferneyhough. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY.



Publications

Richard Taruskin. *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford. "Taruskin [has been] a professor at UC Berkeley since 1987 With this 10-year labor, he has produced a scholarly monument of unprecedented grandeur. . . . The text spans five volumes, totaling 3,825 pages, with a sixth volume devoted to a chronological table, bibliography and index. . . . There are . . . 1.25 million words, 1,800 musical examples and 500 illustrations. At this scale, *The Oxford History* makes Taruskin's earlier magnum opus, the two-volume, 1,800-page *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, look like beach reading. . . . [A]s Taruskin is quick to point out, the Oxford History is not a survey as the term is generally used. It will be of no use to undergraduates studying for exams, and its emphases and exclusions can be striking (nothing on Elgar and Vaughan Williams, nothing on Hugo Wolf, comparatively little on Bruckner, and so forth). . . . Taruskin . . . is after . . . a comprehensive history of musical life as it has been lived by composers, performers and audiences alike. There are a few philosophical themes that recur throughout like a ground bass, giving a coherent structure to the most far-flung topics. One is the distinction between music in its written and sounding form, which is to say between the literal and the oral traditions. . . . [H]e sticks up for Rossini and the world of Italian opera in general, a tradition slighted by (German) historians in part because it 'was centered not on scores but on performances.' A second theme is Taruskin's insistence on the relevance of external history and politics to music Yet a third is the assiduous attention he pays to the posthumous reputations of the great composers . . . and the way their works have been interpreted (and misinterpreted) by later generations. Finally . . . Taruskin's work stands in explicit opposition to the guiding myth . . . that pays obeisance to the notion of inexorable forward motion in music [I]n addition to his striking emphasis on music since 1900 (two of the volumes), Taruskin show a fascinating ability to read recent conflicts back into earlier periods. . . . Taruskin even takes a moment to parse Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*" [Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle, 3/27/05].

Writers

MARK ALBURGER is an eclectic American composer of postminimal, postpopular, and postcomedic sensibilities. He is Editor-Publisher of 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, an award-winning ASCAP composer of concert music published by New Music, conductor, oboist, pianist, vocalist, recording artist, musicologist, theorist, author, and music critic. He has recently embarked on a project to record his complete works (130 opus numbers) over the next 11 years.

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.

