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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2017

SFCMP Presents Stravinsky with Interpolated Improvisations

Last night in Herbst Theatre, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (SFCMP) presented the second of the two concerts in the on STAGE Series of its 46th season. Entitled *Stravinsky Interpolations*, the offering not only involved a highly adventurous approach to music-making but also explored a new dimension of what a concert-going experience could be. The entire evening consisted of the interleaving of two works, each by a different composer. Igor Stravinsky was represented by the instrumental music he composed for “L’Histoire du soldat” (the soldier’s tale), a score for seven musicians composed for the presentation of a narrative written by Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz requiring three actors and one or several dancers. The individual Stravinsky movements were then interleaved with “Lover’s War,” a series of improvisations conceived by trumpeter Peter Evans and inspired by James Baldwin’s essay “The Creative Process.”

The separation of these two threads was emphasized by having each performed by a different ensemble. For the Stravinsky guest artists Dana Jessen (bassoon), Brad Hogarth (cornet), and Brendan Lai-Tong (trombone) joined SFCMP players Jeff Anderle (clarinet), Christopher Froh (percussion), Hrabba Atladottir (violin), and Richard Worn (bass). In “Lover’s War” SFCMP percussionists William Winant and Steven Schick (who also conducted the Stravinsky) joined Evans and his combo, whose other members were Kyle Bruckmann (oboe and English horn), Nava Dunkelman (percussion), and India Cooke (violin). (Ritwik Banerji was originally announced as the combo’s saxophonist, but he did not appear.)

Skeptics might think that this is the sort of project that looks good on paper but is unlikely to fulfill its potential when put into practice. Fortunately, this was far from the case. This was an evening that seized the attention of the listener from the very beginning and kept that listener engaged until the very last notes had faded into the ether.

Much of that engagement probably had to do with how the full program was framed by “Lover’s War,” beginning with a solo trumpet improvisation by Evans and concluding with a group improvisation by

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all of the performers. While none of Ramuz' texts were included, the excerpts from Baldwin's essay, selected to introduce all improvisations following Evans' opening solo, were as suitable for the Stravinsky context as they were for those improvisations. Indeed, the Stravinsky portion could be easily abstracted away from Ramuz' narrative about the soldier who loses his soul to the devil, replaced by its role in a broader context of making music for which Baldwin's observations continue to resonate with relevance.

There was also the way in which Stravinsky and Evans followed parallel strategies, choosing to highlight individual instruments in the different selections, rather than always "working" the full ensemble. Thus, Evans' opening solo anticipated the scraps of trumpet fanfare in the opening "Soldier's March" from the Stravinsky, while Stravinsky's percussion intrusions on a steady march beat were subsequently reflected in the following improvisation for Evans' three percussionists. Similarly, Stravinsky's violin embodies the soldier's soul. However, even after the devil has triumphed in Stravinsky's final movement, Atladottir established how that soul persisted in a series of kick-ass improvised exchanges with Cooke at the very conclusion of the program.

The entire performance lasted for a little over an hour. This may seem brief for a concert evening. However, Stravinsky's music was originally composed as "incidental;" and he never got in the way of the Ramuz narrative. Evans thus kept to a similar scale of duration, meaning that his interpolations made for just the right exchange between equals. As a result, there was nothing "incidental" about either Stravinsky's score or Evans' planned improvisations. Each event was thoroughly absorbing not only in its own right but also in the clarity of its relationship to the other events, both past and future. The only downside was that this was a one-night-only affair!

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:50 AM 

LABELS: CHAMBER MUSIC, JAZZ, MUSIC, STRAVINSKY

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