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SUNDAY, APRIL 23, 2017

Lou Harrison is Treated Splendidly by SFCMP's Centennial Celebration

As was observed yesterday, May 14 will mark the 100th birthday of composer Lou Harrison. This weekend the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (SFCMP) got the jump on the occasion with a festival entitled *Lou Harrison: A Centenary Celebration*, which included three concerts yesterday at Z Space taking place late in the morning, during the afternoon, and in the evening. The morning concert was devoted to the three winners's of SFCMP's *SF Search* competition, but each of the other two concerts featured two significant Harrison pieces sharing the program with works by two living composers.

Over the course of yesterday afternoon's program, I realized that there was so much richness in Harrison's compositions that I was already saturated with thoughts before it was even time to break for dinner. The two pieces provided excellent representation of the exploratory mindset behind his early work (the third of his "Canticle" pieces, composed in 1942) complemented by a piece that was not only much more recent (the "Varied Trio" of 1986) but also written for SFCMP musicians: percussionist William Winant, pianist Julie Steinberg, and violinist David Abel. Furthermore, Winant was on hand to lead yesterday's performance, joined this time by pianist Kate Campbell and violinist Hrabba Atladottir, who was called upon to substitute for Roy Malan with about 24 hours to learn her part.

While we tend to think of Harrison in terms of his inventive approaches to melody, counterpoint, and rhythm, it is also worth acknowledging just how much diversity went into his use of that adjective "varied." Obviously, the variety in his choice of instruments is not a conventional one; but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Each of the players is required to perform in a variety of different ways. This was most evident in Winant's case, since he had to alternate between two different stations outfitted with different arrays of percussion instruments. However, Campbell had to work with far more than the keyboard, not only reaching inside the piano to both stroke and strike the strings but also using her mallet to provide her own contribution to the percussion by striking the bottom of the sounding board. Even

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

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Atladottir had to work with variety, required to use only pizzicato for the second movement. Finally, there was considerable variety in the styles of the movements themselves, alternating between Oriental references, eighteenth-century dances, and a highly chromatic (and very twentieth-century) elegy.

As had been the case when he performed with pianist Sarah Cahill and violinist Kate Stenberg at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music this past November, Winant took responsibility as leader. Indeed, one might add to that “litany of variety” the richness of body language that seemed to inform Winant’s approach to execution, since that body language also did much to communicate his thoughts about expressiveness to the other two players. The result was an excitingly vibrant execution that firmly established the significance of this composition in the repertoire of twentieth-century music.

That case was made just as strongly by the 1942 “Canticle;” but the listening experience was entirely different. This piece was scored for five percussionists along with an ocarina and a guitar. However, the ocarina is required only to play five different pitches; and the guitar part was limited to three cords on a re-tuned instrument. As a result Harrison indicated that both of these parts could be taken by percussionists, because rhythm is primary to the structure of the piece. In the collection of Harrison manuscripts in the Online Archive of California, the operative sentence in Harrison’s description of this piece is the following:

The musical texture is composed of a number of small rhythmicles and melodicles woven together (so to speak) into a form which is roughly a-b-a in shape.

As might be guessed, a “rhythmicle” is basically a very small rhythmic motif (or cell); and a “melodicle” is basically the same sort of thing for a melody!

Yesterday afternoon the guitar was played by SFCMP guitarist David Tanenbaum, and the ocarina was taken by SFCMP clarinetist Jeff Anderle. The percussionists included Winant along with Jim Kassis, Haruka Fuji, Stan Muncy, and Loren Mach. While many of the percussion instruments were pitched, Harrison’s melodicles were defined more by contour than by conventional melodic structure. Once again, much of the expressiveness of the performance came from Winant’s body language; but it did not take much for the other performers to get into the same spirit of things.

Readers may recall that this piece was also performed this past February at the first Other Minds 22 concert. That performance took place in the Mission Dolores Basilica, whose acoustics were definitely suitable for the occasion. However, the altar space was arranged in such a way that one could barely make out the individual performers. Z

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Space seating, on the other hand, was steeply raked; and the performers were arrayed in a semicircle, allowing everyone to make eye contact with everyone else. This enhanced visual setting, which allowed one to see how the performance involved exchanges across ever-changing groupings of the players, made for a far more compelling listening experience; and the acoustics were just as favorable.

Of the two current composers on the program, Annie Gosfield's "Daughters of the Industrial Revolution," composed in 2011, was the more striking, if only for Mach's energetic percussion work (pun intended). The composition was a duo for percussion and cello (Stephen Harrison); and one has to wonder if there was a bit of prankishness in that pairing. Indeed, were it not for the fact that ours has become a culture that seems to take pride in its ignorance of history, I would have assumed that Gosfield's title was tweaking the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Anyone aware of this group, whose motto is "God, Home, and Country" and whose demographic (at least for the first century of its existence) was about as WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) as you could get, might easily have imagined that Gosfield's music would not go down well with the DAR. My own imagination saw a staunch and upright DAR member walking out on the performance before the first minute elapsed, stubbornly puzzled when she saw that no-one was following her!

Gosfield's work is, as they would say, not your grandmother's chamber music. The prevailing dynamic is loud, and the rhythms are aggressively driving. Somewhat surprisingly, Harrison's command of that dynamic was as strong as Mach's, making for an awe-inspiring sense of balance maintained by the two of them. There is an awareness of rock rhetoric, but the music definitely has its own voice. It is also one hell of a lot of fun. Given the precision with which Mach and Harrison had to coordinate, I am not sure if they had as much fun as the listeners; but this was definitely the way to end yesterday afternoon's concert with a bang.

The other recent work was Jimmy Lopez' "Ccantu," composed in 2007 and played at the piano by Campbell. The title is the Quechua name for the national flower of Peru; and, over the course of a modest six minutes, the music depicts the life cycle of this flower. This was definitely the quietest part of the program; and, if the music was not quite as denotative as what one tends to encounter in program music, the intimate rhetorical tone definitely captured all the right connotations. Campbell's performance prioritized sensitivity above all else, and her quietude offered an engaging intermezzo between the two Harrison compositions in which percussion figured so heavily.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:34 AM 

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