

SFCMP percussionists give a thoroughly engaging account of Gérard Grisey

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Cover of a recording of "Le Noir de l'Étoile"
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Last night the [San Francisco Contemporary Music Players](#) (SFCMP) continued their [one-week residency at Z Space](#) with the first of two performances of the second program they prepared entitled *Starscape*. [Once again](#) the program featured an extended composition lasting for about an hour preceded by a much shorter piece lasting less than ten minutes. The title of the program referred only to the longer work, Gérard Grisey's "Le Noir de l'Étoile" (the black of the star).

Both the title and the music itself were inspired by the discovery of the pulsar, detected through radio transmissions, rather than the presence of light. The radio signals that were received are more than mere pulses. Each pulsar has its own characteristic pulse based on the angular momentum of a spinning neutron star, but the spinning itself gives rise to a repeated pattern of changing amplitude of the pulses. In other words the radio signal records different features that are "visible" as the pulsar

spins.

“Le Noir de l’Étoile” is scored for six percussionists (William Winant, Loren Mach, Chris Froh, Nick Woodbury, Sean Dowgray, and Megan Shieh) situated such that they surround the audience. The score also calls for brief interjections of recordings, each of which is a sonification of the signal received by a specific pulsar (i.e. a mapping of that radio signal into another signal in the audible range). Two specific pulsars provided the sources for those recordings. Robert Kirzinger’s notes for the program book also observed that some 400 objects are distributed among the six percussionists. While this is true, it overlooks the fact that the repertoire of objects for each percussionist is basically the same. A major feature of the score itself involves the spatial migration of motifs, so to speak, as a pattern that emerges from one direction finds itself interacting with reproductions (not necessarily strict) originating from different locations.

This is actually a rather conventional approach to composition, even if it happens to have been realized by unconventional means. Think of the experience of listening to a familiar symphony in a concert hall. Think of how just about every theme introduced by the composer migrates from one section of the orchestra to another, often taking on new emphasis through superpositions involving different sections playing at the same time.

Indeed, when one recognizes that “Le Noir de l’Étoile” has been structured as four “windows” (each providing a different “view” of the recorded sources), it is not difficult for the attentive listener to approach the performance as (s)he would the performance of any large-scale nineteenth-century symphony. Comparisons with Anton Bruckner or Gustav Mahler would, by no means, be out of the question, particularly if one is willing to acknowledge a “family resemblance” between the opening rhythms on the bass drum and the bass drum rhythms near the beginning of Mahler’s third symphony. Nor is it difficult to think of those four “windows” as an opening *allegro* (definitely *not* in sonata form, though), a “scherzo” based on the rhythm of the first (Vela) pulsar recording, a more expansive “adagio,” and a concluding “vivace” in which the energy level gradually arises, only then to be cut short by one fierce stroke on a suspended cymbal rotating at an angle to induce a slight vibrato due to a Doppler effect. The fact is that Grisey’s duration of about an hour turns out to sit very comfortably with anyone used to the durational scale of the symphonies of Bruckner and Mahler; and the account given by the SFCMP percussionists seemed to acknowledge (even if not explicitly intentionally) that a symphonic architecture was in play in this music.

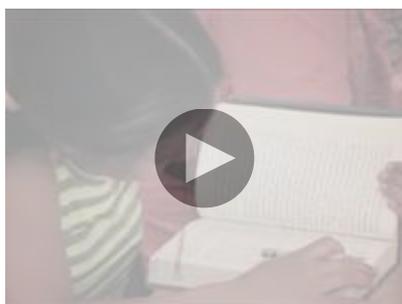
In that respect the “overture” for the evening was about as different as one could imagine. Kirzinger’s notes for the program book associate Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri with the Fluxus movement and its interest in repurposing familiar objects. The familiar objects in Loren Mach’s performance of her “N° 45 immense” included a red apple (which is eaten), newspaper, magnifying glass, water, zipper, plastic cup of water, sand blocks, coins, small bells, shoe box, bass guitar string, espresso cup and saucer, clear transparent plastic pen, wooden table, and “fizzy vitamin C tablet.” Almost all of the sounds were at the threshold of audibility, suggesting that sound was little more than a side effect of the manipulation of the objects.

All this was amusingly entertaining considering that it did not go on for very long. Nevertheless, having never encountered a “fizzy vitamin C tablet,” I had to wonder if Mach might have taken some liberties with the score and resorted to the more familiar Alka-Seltzer. Certainly, it was difficult to observe the “coda” of the composition, in which both Mach and the audience watched the tabled diffuse into a magnified glass of water, without thinking of the plop-plop-fizz-fizz jingle! The composer may not have intended that association, but it emerged as yet another subversive dimension in a subversive approach to concert performance.

SUGGESTED LINKS

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