

Saturday, March 18, 2006 Tech & Techno at Zankel Hall

The idea of melding electronics with traditional orchestral instruments is not exactly new or earthshaking but opportunities to actually hear such "hybrid" music performed by a large, professional orchestra are few and far between. New concert music of any kind is a tough sale and finding an orchestra that will take a chance on music written for a limited audience by relatively unknown composers is about as hard as finding a willing hunting partner for Dick Cheney. Throw in electronica, with the potential to create loud, screechy, electronic burps and other rude noises and you could have an audience consisting solely of the composers' proud parents and friends.

That's why the American Composers Orchestra is so indispensable. Under music director Steven Sloane, the ACO fearlessly goes where others do not dare and--just as important--it can reliably fill a small hall like Zankel with sympathetic listeners for adventuresome programs.

Last night was "Tech & Techo" night with four--count 'em--world premieres of ACO commissions. A fifth piece--Mason Bates' *Omnivorous Furniture*, which made its New York debut--was the only piece not specifically created for occasion. As [Frank J. Oteri](#), who apparently never sleeps, explains [here](#), the ACO ventured full-force into this territory with its [Orchestral Tech](#) initiative in 2001--an event greatly overshadowed by the WTC disaster a month earlier.

Overall, it was a strong, convincing program. **The crowd-pleaser of the evening was Neil Rolnick's *iFiddle Concerto*, played by the amazing Todd Reynolds, who showed incredible dexterity in manipulating the more or less hidden electronic plumbing without missing a single virtuostic turn on the violin. Reynolds is a jazzy player who eats syncopation for lunch and Rolnick's score provided him with the opportunity to gorge himself silly. The piece is conventional in pitting the soloist against the orchestra but the greybeards (it's ironic that many of the best players of new music in town are fifty- and sixty-somethings) in the ACO more than held their own.**

Justin Messina's *Abandon* was a perfect opener; light on the electronics, subtle on the rhythms, armed with a couple of complex competing themes, vividly decorated with fast notes from the vibraphone and piano. Mason Bates' *Omnivorous Furniture* had some gorgeous string writing although it went on a bit too long and, in places, sounded like Mancini on steroids and in, others, like Mancini on quaaludes. My personal favorite of the evening was Edmund Campion's stunningly nuanced *Practice* which showed the Dallas-born composer's deep French roots, especially his study at IRCAM and with Gerard Grisey. It make a strong case that spectralism is one of the most promising avenues for this type of music. And, who knew you get such musical bang out of a triangle?

The final piece on the program was *Call Them All: Fantasy Projections for Film, Laptop, and Orchestra* by Skokie, Illinois-native [Daniel Bernard Roumain](#), aka DBR, described in press releases as a "charismatic Haitian-American composer

and classical violinist." Roumain's piece was "multimedia" in the sense that it included a video by Janet Wong featuring Bill T. Jones as narrator with DJ Scientific on-stage adding real time "club scene sounds" to the orchestral texture of Roumain's music. None of these elements were particularly related to each other or especially compelling on their own. Roumain's music—which appeared to be more of an arrangement of a familiar spiritual than something original--sounded as if it were lifted from the Randy Newman "Good Ol' Boys" orchestration fake book. Wong's film reminded me of mercifully lost Super 8 masterpieces that artist friends of mine were making in illegal Soho lofts 40 years ago. DJ Scientific was apparently there for street cred, ghettos being in short supply in Skokie.

Bill T. Jones is a compelling dancer but his film "memories"—of favorite trees and overpasses and of disposing of a skunk and being poor in upstate New York—were pointless, ordinary and unrelated to the stereotypical "black" experience that Roumain's music was trying so desperately to evoke. The whole exercise felt like a shiny new Bottega Veneta briefcase, filled with old celebrity photos, cornbread crumbs and stale shuck and jive.

posted by Jerry Bowles **4:12 PM Comment (0)**