

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

Food, Drink,
and Talk
Not Included

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By Thomas Goss

symposium, n. 1. Drinking-feast, often with music &c., following dinner in ancient Greece; 2. Meeting for philosophical discussion....(*Universal Dictionary of the English Language* , 1939)

This hardly described what was billed as a symposium Saturday at the Marin Veteran's Memorial Auditorium. Several years ago, when I was one of the composers featured on a Marin Symphony Bay Area Composers symposium, that word applied well. The orchestra's music director, Gary Sheldon, not only conducted the orchestra through a reading of new works by four Bay Area composers, but also led the discussions. The composers and colleagues from the local music scene sat on the stage with the orchestra and explained each work as it was presented. When all works were performed, there was a general discussion and questions were taken from the audience of several hundred concertgoers of every stripe. Once upon a time . . .

The contrast between that event of 1998 and the one this weekend was marked. The current maestro, that superb rehearser and contemporary music conductor Alisdair Neale, was absent, conducting elsewhere in some distant place. No panel was present. Each work was rehearsed in turn, followed by all-too-brief questions to the composer from an audience well below two hundred and seeming to include contain few if any of the local new music population.

What's worse was the alteration of purpose. In 1998, the Symposium was for and about emerging Bay Area composers. There were three of us, plus then-resident composer Leslie Burrs. In 2002, the words "Bay Area" have been dropped, and with it much of the this opportunity for the public to hear works in progress in this region.

Nothing new

Indeed, these were not works in progress. Kurt Rohde's excerpt *Strong Motion*, as the lone work by a composer from this area, had already been premiered by the Pacific Chamber Symphony. Armand Russell's *Toward the Horizon*, a fun, cinematic tone poem, was a complete work by a well-accomplished composer whose career certainly needs no push.

The most contrary presentation was the rehearsal of John Harbison's *Remembering Gatsby: Foxtrot for Orchestra*. Harbison is neither from the Bay Area, nor emerging, nor was he even present to answer questions. In fact, this was nothing more than an exhaustive rehearsal of a work already programmed for performance on the following night.

These objections aside, it must be said that the Symphony was at the top of its form, especially the excellent brass section, the equal of any among the freeway philharmonics. Guest conductors George Thomson and David Alan Miller were both witty and engaging hosts, and aptly included the audience in the process of breaking down a work, fixing the tough bits, and doing a precise and inspired run-through. And the works themselves were worthy, well-written and deserving of performance.

A narrative arc

Russell's "horizon" seemed to be delineated at its outset by slow, soft caution in muted strings with lines trading off between solo players from that corps and the winds. The glowing mountainside of a melodic curve was traced by the lower strings with the warm, solid underpinning of tubist Zachariah Spellman. Then warning shots from the brass heralded a more energetic and aggressive episode from the strings. A big pentatonic wallow was interrupted by an episode of tensions and releases that could easily have served as a movie cue in some epic by Huston or Scorsese. The large-scale scoring towards the end gave the Marin Symphony brass some ripe moments of beautiful extroversion. The coda dropped back to the slow groove of the opening, swelling gently in a calm crescendo to the tight little flicker of a final bar.

The opening motive of Rohde's study in motion had the offbeat energy and pizzazz of middle-century Bernstein. It was a contrast in every way with Russell. Brash motorism was plied with terse and frenetic gestures, settling down reluctantly to a moody tension. Atonality was balanced by masterful form and fascinating thematic development in this all-too-brief work. In the delivery of both this piece and Russell's, conductor Thomson proved a most capable obstetrician, getting quickly and competently to the heart of each potential crisis and doing clean, clear preventive work before moving on. His sly and endearing instructions to the ensemble were nearly as entertaining as the music itself. The process laid bare the anatomy of each work for the audience, making the effect of hearing them in their entirety both informed and intuitive.

David Alan Miller's approach as he conducted the Harbison was as big a contrast to Thomson's as the Harbison was to Russell and Rohde. In no way as economical as

Thomson, Miller seemed to be more involved with the connective tissue of Harbison's nostalgic jaunt than with its skeleton. Phrasing and dynamic contours were carefully worked over for their logical and expressive relationships.

Playing around

Described by the conductor as the "Norma Desmond - Sunset Boulevard Moment," the ominous prelude portended disaster of D.W. Griffith-like proportions, only to be blown away into tatters by the cool, sassy breeze of the upbeat little foxtrot of the title, *Remembering Gatsby: Foxtrot for Orchestra*. Occasionally cartoonish, often steeped in the 20's Parisian salon style, the danciness stepped a straight line through crazed melodic swoops and comic rhythm breaks. The slow, insidious reintroduction of the initial theme was deliciously malevolent, bringing the piece to a close with unsettled finality.

In some respects, Miller's rehearsal style contradicted the idea of the project. He rehearsed the musicians hard and heavy, sifting every possible element with a meticulousness that the listeners may have been unprepared for, to judge by the gradual attrition of the audience. He took nearly an hour to rehearse a six-minute work, by contrast with Thomson's total of seventy minutes for rehearsal, questions and performance of twenty minutes of completed works by Russell and Rohde. The proceedings lost their charm long before Miller ran out of places to tweak in the score. The public rehearsal of the Harbison seemed only a further careless departure from the whole point of the affair, which was presumably to promote a sense of community between composers and their potential audience.

These questions need to be answered by whoever is at the helm. What kind of symposium is it that has no general discussion amongst featured guests? Is it appropriate to use precious symposium time in rehearsing an already scheduled work, and more so when the composer is not in attendance? And is the Marin Symphony willing to turn its back on the vital, rewarding and engaged community of emerging Bay Area composers?