

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW
A Composers' Advocate,
Puts Her Own Foot Forward

Apr. 30, 00

By Thomas Goss

The small, sleepy community of Nevada City bears a close kinship to the Bay Area, especially San Francisco. So many of our artists, poets and musicians have made a semi-permanent residence there that it resembles a reservoir of talent not unlike the Hetch Hetchy, glittering in the highlands to be tapped by a thirsty community far away.

One outstanding example is composer D'Arcy Reynolds. As coordinator for the Bay Area Chapter of the American Composers Forum, she has helped foster the creation and performance of literally hundreds of new works by local composers, through salon performances, workshops, creative grants, and multi-disciplinary programs. But, as her own salon concert last Sunday afternoon in Nevada City's Miner's Foundry (a community and arts center) proved, this administrative flair is perhaps the lesser of her accomplishments. Backed by a cadre of topnotch Northern California musicians, she brought to her part-time adopted community a program that blended variety of style and instrumentation with a powerful, perceptive individuality.

The centerpiece of this feast was Reynolds' setting of Bay Area poet and Mills College English professor Chana Bloch's verse, *The Past Keeps Changing*, set for soprano and string trio. The soprano, Laura Decher, flitted from mood to mood with ease as the harmonically complex music followed the ruminative, dreamy imagery of the text with touching, sometimes disturbing intuition. Introducing the first song, *Thirteen*, brisk, clumsy bow-strokes underlined the callow vulnerability of adolescence and backed with sympathetic tenderness lines like, "The heat [of the sun] reaches inside your shirt. It sees everything."

The Family proved a fitting vehicle for Decher's sense of dead-on pitch and lyricism as she and the strings seemed to pry open different layers of thematic briskness like the nesting dolls described in the text. *Little Love Poem* was a suspended flower in warm, slow, translucent liquid; heavy, fragrant and viscous.

The cycle ran into some problems in the last two songs. The harshness of the atonal melodicism seemed to overpower the essence of the texts from time to time, and lost some of the more naturalist beauty of setting of the first three numbers. This was most evident in *Day-Blind*, whose realization of the text's description of transcendent ennui was a little too close for comfort. At times the coldness of the melodic line subtracted support from climactic passages. Likewise, the forced high notes which ended both this song and the finale, *Alone on a Mountain*, were uncomfortably married to the textual meaning. Nevertheless, this last song in its unfolding thematic statements and tightly written episodes wonderfully captured the spiritual openness, abandonment of time, and organic beauty of Bloch's writing.

Reynolds' light, brief Theme and Variations for Clarinet and Piano stood out from

the other duos in its sense of musical dialogue that suggested that the word "Conversations" might be more fitting than "Variations." A placid, swaying eight-bar melody progressed and developed through the thoughtful interplay between clarinetist Peter Josheff and composer Reynolds at the piano. These variations dovetailed with no perceptible interruption, a sweet, chaotic but tonal riff chasing its own tail as the duo tossed it back and forth and up and down the scale. The true crest of the wave hit near the end, in a slow passage before the inevitable rush to the finish. Suddenly, the poise and clarity of Josheff's playing was brought into relief as the border of silence around the slow round tones seemed to glow.

Reynolds' String Quartet No. 1 proved to be that happiest of creatures, both musical and enduring to the memory and also demonstrative of the abilities of its interpreters. The Ariel String Quartet lived up to its namesake in deftness and cleverness, bringing spirit and spice to this gumbo of styles and influences. The opening Andante con moto flirted with atonality while maintaining a sense of harmonic direction and real melodic development, with abundant coloristic devices. The all-too-brief Waltz belied its moniker, for so numerous were the cross-rhythms and flurried motives, "La Caccia" might be a more fitting title. Variations On A Theme By Ginastera was a tango that took a good long time to warm up, but eventually a passionate harmonic language glittered through subtly varied rhythmic pulses. The movements worked well together but left the sense that there was still a movement missing.

The Five Preludes for Viola and Piano, a series of lyric episodes, demonstrated her capacity for brevity. Each small slice explored a different whim, culminating in a splash of color and sound that recalled the vibrancy and humor of Dutilleux or Poulenc. *Tweet Suite*, settings from Pablo Neruda's *Art of Birds*, blended Reynolds' intuition and musical daring in lines that declaimed, lilted, and whispered. Phrases of spoken text would spring from the fabric of the music with irrepressible vigor. Decher was suitably dramatic as both chanteuse and songbird, and Reynolds' pianism showed her the equal as performer of her gathered colleagues.

(Thomas Goss is resident composer for Moving Arts Dance Collective, and is a member of New Release Alliance Composers, the Cabaret Composers Consortium, and sits on the steering committee of the Bay Area Chapter of the American Composers Forum.)

©2000 Thomas Goss, all rights reserved