

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

New Japanese Music, International, Personal

September 23, 2001

By Thomas Goss

One of the most obvious effects of today's globalization is the free sharing of languages and cultures. To be in the arts and sciences today is to belong to a country larger than the one you were born in, a point tellingly made at last Sunday's performance of Japanese composers by the Berkeley Contemporary Chamber Players at UC Berkeley's Hertz Hall. As these works showed, the musical heritage of a country is becoming less impetus or framework than flavor or character, while the composer's true emphasis seems to be more on expression of personal experience and emotion or insight.

On the whole, there was little that was inherently *Japanese* about these works, considering the broader twentieth-century definition of that country's contemporary repertory. Written over the span of the last eleven years, these pieces seemed less constrained by eccentricity of style, extremity of pose, or denial of Eastern influence, postures which plagued earlier Japanese contemporary music. If the definition of peace, ultimately, has become comity of nations, then these works appropriately represented the evening's theme, which was commemoration of the U.S.-Japan Peace Treaty of 1951.

Foremost in impact, both visceral and aural, was Akira Nishimura's *Duologue* for timpani and piano, which started more as avalanche than conversation. Mei-Fang Lin rolled and rattled the piano's lowest and thickest strings as timpanist Russell Greenberg, over the skins of his six kettledrums, reinforced the opening of a murky chordal outline. As low in pitch as the music remained (the piano never even approached middle C throughout), it was still easy to determine the melodic contours between the hammered and beaten notes. True "duologue" did not emerge until after the piano's gentle but tense solo on stopped strings, joined in that sere texture by brushed timps.

The brilliant *moto perpetuo* that evolved along an upward dynamic and dramatic curve put the earlier experience of walking by the constant tattoo of the Sproul Plaza Eternal Thump Brigade into perspective. Here was crisply executed, tightly written percussion music of the highest order.

A flurry, hoot and curve

Two notable approaches to the decoration of empty space both complemented and opposed each other. The first, Toshio Hosokawa's *Vertical Time Study I* for clarinet, cello and piano was both figurative and linear calligraphy. Long daubs were crossed by short, quick strokes, then briefly surrounded by the white blankness of silence. Only the occasional flurry, hoot, or outward melodic curve away from the

stasis gave the audience a chance to hear the real virtuosity and depth of expression of which clarinetist Peter Josheff and cellist Leighton Fong are capable.

The reverse approach, outlining the boundaries of emptiness rather than sparsely inhabiting its center, was explored by Joji Yuasa in his *Cosmos Haptic III-Kokuh*. Alone on stage, koto-player Philip Flavin started with a slow, articulated yet spare meditation. When Shigeo Tachibana joined him, walking slowly onstage while echoing the music's attitude in whispering shakuhachi lines, a circle seemed to form emphasizing the intense aloneness of these two sonic textures. As if to accentuate this, the piece ended as it began, as the shakuhachi and koto players withdrew from the stage, their music eventually receding from the sound picture as well.

Other works on the program, while not quite as successful, had some interesting features. Keiko Fujie's *Le Rouge et le Noir* was beautifully written for the guitar and violin, a fitting piece for Michael Goldberg and Phyliss Kamrin. They captured its shifting moods and variety of structural approaches with flair. Yet in the end, variety became the piece's undoing, as it did not settle in or develop emotional or integral consequence.

Innovative resonance

A similar lack of cohesion was shared by Yuji Takahashi's *Sangen Sanju*, a solo for samisen that did have a certain innovative and contemplative resonance. Yet in some areas it lacked structural proportion, while in other places it felt confined. There were moments of powerful insight as contrasts were explored between poise and whimsy, and the use of linked patterns like ragas allowed for spontaneity in performance. But in the end, the trick of basing the core of the work on a computer algorithm had less aesthetic power than the composer may have aimed for.

As the contribution of Japan's most successful musical export and generally recognized grand old man, the late Toru Takemitsu, *Between Tides*, for piano trio, settled to a natural and fitting position as concert-ender. With good reason. His piece exemplified not only the embracing of many musical styles and influences, but the abandonment of dogmatism and artifice. Lushness of emotional contour along with a sparseness of forward motion realized the languorous potency implied in the title, thanks to the performance of cellist Fong, violinist Anna Presler, and pianist Michael Seth Orland.

The music's structure consisted of a series of constantly restarting arcs, giving the effect of watching misty scenery. The harmonic language was a beautiful mixture of late Impressionism and the contemporary Neo-Romanticism of Eastern Europe. It illustrated how moving Takemitsu could be as a composer, once liberated from the arcana of atonality and mathematics. But in truth, I didn't try to define anything as I listened. All I could think about was how much he just sounded like himself, and how powerful that was.