

Contemporary Music Review  
New Music Works Ensemble  
Performing works of the American Composers Forum  
Old First Concerts, Friday, October 5

Thomas Goss

Friday nights's performance by the New Music Works Ensemble of works by the local Bay Area Chapter of the American Composer's Forum presented a tantalizing collection of "almosts." The concert was "almost" an ACF salon, wherein new works are presented amidst expository chat and audience dialogue. It was "almost" the statement of a collective aesthetic that seems to be evolving in the Bay Area composer's scene.

But most interestingly, the five works performed were almost all composed in the mid-90's, from a collection of local heavy-hitters whose musical language has undergone noticeable evolution since that time. It was fortunate that the pieces in question showed some of the strongest and most characteristic aspects of their composers and few of the excesses, providing a perspective for those audience members who have more recently become acquainted with their music.

Two outstanding works from members of Common Sense Composers Collective served as bookends, both originally commissioned and performed by Alternate Currents in 1995. Both were experiments in thematic transformation. Belinda Reynolds' "coming around..." [no caps cq] opened the concert with a gentle rollick sloshing the spaces between grave splashes of piano chunk, all of which merely set up a slowly unwinding statement over the suggestion of a pulse. Structural mastery was contrasted with natural empathy as a beautiful cello solo became duo with violin companionship, backed by the gradual clinking of waltz interroto on high piano keys, leading to a rambling cascade of thematic texture which eventually encompassed the overall rhythmic pattern. The return to the original setting was as climactic as it was moving, illustrating Reynolds' power of instinct and craft in the compositional process.

The closing Common Sense contribution came from Dan Becker, whose punchy, nervy style is underscored by an obsession with structural detail. The statement that opened his piece, "S.T.I.C." (Sensitivity To Initial Conditions), was classic Becker, a maximization of the tonal potential of flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano in fifths, low bonks and snap pizzicato. Suave explorations were closely bordered with aggression in a closely reasoned conceptual outlay, in which each new element was developed to its logical extreme, creating in its reshaping the underlying texture for the next element. This was a variation form which seemed to take its thematic material from accidents picked up along the way rather than any defined pattern of notes. What was the greatest point of fascination, in the end, was the effect of Becker's fastidiousness flirting with chaos, and winning only by default.

Erling Wold's "Close" followed comfortably on Reynold's heels as the second piece of the evening, and displayed NMWE's director Phil Collins' exceptional talent as he led a complement of six musicians through the long, complex score. Created in 1996 in collaboration with choreographer Cid Pearlman of Nesting Dolls, the piece retained much that was suggestive of motion and interaction with deceptively small and subtle gestures.

“Close” opened with a crystalline, melancholic fourth which held down the center of a pulsing, hanging chord, effectively getting everything out of it before moving on. Wonderful contrasts served to build a continuity of texture, in hopping little clarinet staccati and upwardly sliding bass licks under a velvety low flute line. When the roles reversed and the flute picked up the pulse, the classic arcane sonority of the Yamaha DX7 could be heard in a glassy-but-murky string patch, subtracting some of the security beneath the illusion of serenity. The latter half of the work seemed to move away from thematic development and toward more traditional minimalism, not unsuccessfully though it lacked the freshness and innovation of the preceding material, which finally returned in the soft intensity of the long, reverential coda.

Paul Davies’ “Mirror of the Sea,” was part tone poem, part cosmic pun. Descriptive to a positively cinematic degree, it played off of the nature of the note of “C” itself, deriving much of its structure from a playful manipulation of the music relationship to that tone. A splatter of frothing, billowing lines tumbled over one another, followed by an abrupt sense of calm over a sneaky marimba tremolo. The oceanic image-building machinery was traditional, yet the operation of it was original, in liquid piano arpeggiations, clarinet flutter and squall, demon mallet snippets, and the toss and swell of bow over violin and cello hulls all contributing to the picture of unsettled suspension. Despite all of the work of artifice that went into it, the piece’s most winning quality was its simple charm that seemed immune to the high bloviation of many a postminimalist pedigree.

If Hyo-shin Na’s piece was not as successful, it might have been in the degree of its elements rather than its content. “Dirge,” a violin-piano duo, hung on the note “A” above middle “C,” a passionate digging-in for the violinist on both open and stopped strings with the occasional detour, as the pianist doled out little cryptic riffs and jazzy tone clusters. Each episode continued just a hair past the point of interest without developing or building, giving the piece a somewhat patched-together, offhand feel, almost like a pianist noodling while a violinist warmed up and checked their tuning. Yet it all made sense in a weird sort of way by the end of the piece, though the inherent message would be a tough second listen.