

Twilight Concerts

Millennium

Arnold Schoenberg, Ode to Napoleon

Elvis Costello, The Juliet Letters

Elaine Kaufman Cultural Center (Merkin) November 18, 1996

Founded just two years ago, Millenium has already established the kind of reputation most groups never achieve in twenty. Its premise -- to present chamber music masterpieces from the standard repertoire alongside new, unfamiliar works -- is common enough. So is its ability to draw from a pool of some two dozen performers a wide variety of works. Its secret, of course, is in the quality of individual musicianship and especially the uncommonly fine guidance of its Artistic Director, Scott St. John.

Mr. St. John played first violin in Merkin's "Twilight Concert" (from 7-8 PM) which paired Schoenberg's **Ode To Napoleon** with excerpts from Elvis Costello's **Juliet Letters**. He was joined by Lara St. John (violin), Ellen DePasquale (viola), Matthew Barley (cello), James Parker (piano in the Schoenberg), and baritone Christopheren Nomura. The group cut a modish and pleasant appearance, dressed in blacks and greys -- young, hip, and serious.

Even Schoenberg devotees (perhaps they especially) debate the merits of his **Ode to Napoleon**. A late work (Op. 41, written immediately after A.S. became a U.S. citizen in 1942) based on Byron's poem denouncing Napoleon, the piece is sometimes criticized as too didactic, too obvious, and its nods to The Eroica's Eb's a little silly. The voice can easily get lost -- not so much in amplitude as in focus. Mr. Nomura's dramatization was a mite overdone -- sprechstimme, after all, can sound unintentionally and artificially pompous: but this is music where glissandi droop at the words "mournful flower", after all-- and a greater range of expression would have been welcome.

The inventiveness of Schoenberg's string writing (which when played by really good string players like these is such a pleasure), next to Costello's, for whom following Schoenberg it is a stretch to call it string writing at all, is still a surprise, even for this listener who revered Schoenberg's late works while a graduate student during the 70's. (While

at the same time admiring Costello's emerging work.) Costello's strings sound pleasant but hollow, in need of a transcription, though they are, presumably, themselves transcriptions of ideas Costello worked out at the piano with the help of Brodsky quartet members (for whom the piece was originally written).

Mr. Nomura's ability to sing like these were songs from a Broadway musical -- by dropping "ing"s, pronouncing "my" and "I" as "mah" and "Ah" -- (thus "Ahm sleepin' with mah eyes open") -- didn't help Mr. Costello's cause, though; this kind of artificial casualness is like wearing a sign proclaiming "This is light stuff: NOT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY."

These were petty annoyances, however, made all the more so by the overall superiority of the performances in every other way. I'll be looking out for the next Millenium concert.