

NORTH/SOUTH CONSONANCE presents NEW YEAR CELEBRATION!
Music by Composers from Mexico and the US
Sunday, January 7, 2001 – Christ & St. Stephen’s Church, New York

Darkness Visible (1998) by Ana Lara; *Fictions* (1998) by Randall Snyder,
Unlikely Neighbors (1993) by William Mayer and *Symphony No. 1 in C*
Major, Op. 21 (2000) by Mark Alburger ; Max Lifchitz, conductor

Commissioned by Mexico’s Onyx New Music Ensemble, and based on William Styron’s book by the same name, Ana Lara’s Darkness Visible is a big, brooding work for flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, viola, cello and double bass. Ms. Lara, by her own admission, does not think in terms of instrumental line, but likes thinking about her compositions as three-dimensional solids. An instrument’s register, dynamic, and timbre (she makes liberal use of harmonics, for example) become single elements in a sonic construction that accumulates mass, density and volume over time.

This kind of sound sculpture is not easy to pull off in performance; instrumental balance is critical to the shape of the piece, so dynamics must be precisely executed, as one can do in a recording studio with knobs and faders. Max Lifschitz did an admirable job of leading the North/South Consonance ensemble, but I suspect that there wasn’t anywhere near ample rehearsal time to show the piece off.

Performance problems aside, one would have expected more interesting sonorities, given Ms. Lara’s penchant for playing with the overtone series; harmonics often sounded like wrong notes, a strange phenomenon in a piece purportedly emphasizing mass over line. Moreover her use of percussion seemed an afterthought; loud thwaps functioned almost as cue cards, telling us something dramatic is happening, and her use of cymbal crashes and timpani rolls seemed more like place holders than sonic events. They all seemed rather unnecessary, either as dramatic or formal devices.

Part II had some intricately lovely string textures, and the perfectly-timed and placed entrance of the piano into the score showed that Ms. Lara’s ear can be perfect.

Randall Snyder’s Fictions, for the full North/South Chamber Orchestra, is a knotty and very deft piece based on a collection of short stories by Jorge Luis Borges called “Ficciones”, and created the kinds of ephemeral sonorities Ana Lara was probably hoping for. The playing was far superior than in Lara’s piece, and one suspects because Snyder knows his way around instrumental writing so much better.

It’s rather a shame Snyder’s harmonic language is a dense, persistent kind of atonality which – his remarkable coloration of pitches notwithstanding -- becomes gray and undifferentiated. One wishes for

more harmonic movement – the kinds of surprises one gets when new pitches are introduced into a collection.

Snyder supplied a curious little guide with the program notes, for “those interested in following the circuitous unfolding of the music.” Separated into 23 parts, with names like “Insouciant: clarinet-bassoon duet” or “Broad: wind trills followed by bassoon solo”, the guide was, one must assume, as much a formal structure of the piece as it was a novelty. At the very least, the guide, which was easy to follow, offered nice points of reference for even the least sophisticated listener.

Next was William Mayer’s Unlikely Neighbors, a diversionary (especially in light of the preceding two pieces) short, clever piece which skillfully combines – and contrasts -- the folk song “Turtle Dove” with “California Here I Come.” Written as a wedding present for the composer’s daughter who was about to move to California with her new husband, Mayer’s style has been aptly characterized as a “lyrical music, favored with an unusual flow of fancy and wit, and marked by a free use of disparate material with the aim of synthesizing so-called opposites into a coherent whole.” That sums it up. Scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, trombone and piano, Mayer presents blocks and snippets, progressions and riffs in, around, and against each other, all the while never blurring the very clear boundaries between his two subjects, yet at times making it appear as if they were both not just in the same piece, but the same piece. The performance was spirited and charming; trombonist Steve Shulman especially shined; his “California Here I Come” entrances in the middle of “Turtle Dove” made him an unlikely, but very welcome, neighbor.

Mark Alburger’s Symphony No. 1 in C Major, Op. 21 concluded the program. If the title sounds familiar, it’s because it should be: Alburger’s is more than a nod to Beethoven, it’s a borrowing of a most unusual kind. Alburger has taken Beethoven’s score and virtually stripped its measures of their content, leaving ... well, empty measures, but an exact number of them, to be sure. And, since we are invited to take the tempo indications seriously (“Adagio Molto”, “Allegro con brio”, etc.) one assumes the composer will make use of them as some kind of sectional dividers. But that being done, the composer’s now on his own to fill those measures with un-Beethovenian, all-Alburgerian music.

This may seem like a whacky idea, but to readers of this journal, of which Alburger is the founder, editor, and author of such columns as “By The Numbers”, his Grid Method will appear as another example of his wry, and somewhat wicked sense of humor. The truth is, the piece works. Whether it works because of the Grid is not hard to answer: of course not. Alburger’s Grid is a means to an end, a source of inspiration to him as much as, say, Cage’s watermarks or Xenakis’s mathematical equations were to them. The casual listener shouldn’t know, or much care, how the piece was actually constructed. Or, put in another way, one’s source of inspiration is irrelevant if the piece which results isn’t

worth listening to. And if it is, knowing the inspirational source, or working method in this case, is simply an anecdotal condiment to a tasty musical main course.

So now for the filling. The first movement begins with a repetitive figure (B-C-E-B-C-G) which dissolves in very un-Beethoven fashion; lots of themes and fragments follow, including some ragtime. In the slow movement, he interweaves 2 related themes; Alburger has a fondness for modulation but a seemingly conscious avoidance of development, replacing classicism with minimalism – that is, motivic repetitions at different pitch levels. The Presto gives the biggest nod to Ludwig and, not coincidentally, Philip Glass: melodic figures are echoed by orchestral subsections, the presto theme unravels (the nod to Beethoven) in a harmonically static section (and another to Glass.) If contrast is your thing, this movement will prove the most rewarding and effective.