

A Feast of New Music

The fashion today is that everything must be radical and new. They are not the same thing. "Radical" means a return to roots, and "new" means something that has never happened before. By these definitions, most of the music performed in Santa Fe last month was neither, some was one or the other, but a surprising amount was excellent.

An event that was interesting but neither radical nor new was the performance by Bay area, avant-garde composer Lou Harrison and the Mills College Gamelan. Following in the footsteps of Haydn, Pierre, De Falla and Satie, Harrison presented a puppet opera, *Richard Whittington*, utilizing a text by John Masefield, the gamelan, and voices. The flat shadow puppets, held up against a silken screen and lighted from behind, were traditional, but elsewhere Harrison cross-cultured with a vengeance. The only things new were the gamelan instruments which are now made in the U.S. They are aluminum which produces a lighter, brighter tone than the traditional instruments of brass and iron. But cross-cultural synthesis, no matter how consciously done, takes generations and many practitioners before it jells, as has happened in jazz. The gamelan is no exception.

What disappointed this listener was that the whole thing was so undeveloped. Harrison is a gifted composer, but with so magnificent an instrument, as well as adequate voices, he seems to have merely sketched instead of creating a fully realized work.

Oriental arts are in no hurry, traditional puppet shows often last from dusk to dawn, and there is little connection between their concepts of action, tension and release, and ours. *Richard Whittington* is more narrated than acted, and tended toward what we, with our saturated senses and television nurtured impatience, would call boring. Many of the patrons, who had laid out \$8, walked out.

"Sounds are excellent (of themselves)" said grand old composer of the avant-garde, John Cage. So they proved during *Tone Roads West*, the marathon poetry and music festival put together by Santa Fe composer Peter Garland, poet Arthur Sze and indefatigable administrator Suzanne Jamison. This was the first time an event of this nature has taken place in Santa Fe, and it is to be hoped the funding will be forthcoming to make it an annual bash. Of the five concerts given over four days, three were exciting. Honors were divided among Santa Fe composers Joseph Weber and Peter Garland, and Boston composer-violinist Malcolm Goldstein, making his first Southwestern appearance.

Weber is a lanky, flame-haired and bearded man in whom time and fortune have created some flame-like opinions and a certain bittersweet tension. Born in Antioch, California, he attended San Francisco State University, where his teacher was the composer Roger Nixon. His peers during the yeasty time of the '60s were such now recognized composers as Loren Rush, Steve Reich, and Pauline Oliveros.

The comparison will doubtless not please him, but Weber's performance of his own compositions on piano and the St. Francis Auditorium organ inevitably reminded me of the work of former Santa Fe/Taos composer Tom Ehrlich. There is the driving energy, the extended, marvelously arched line, the sonority. Weber gladly admits the influence of Debussy on his work, and the result is pure delight.

Driving energy is also evident in razor-thin, 30 year old Peter Garland, who may not make 40 unless he learns to pace himself. He is certainly full of passionate intensity, and his music is compelling. While his earlier piano/harp pieces are wonderfully lyrical, his more recent work, particularly *Matachin Dances* (played by Malcolm Goldstein and Lynn Case, with Garland handling the gourd rattles), is one of the few really successful uses of "ethnic" materials by an "Anglo" composer.

Energy as pure delight is again applicable to the dazzling work of Malcolm Goldstein who flinches at being called a virtuoso. There is no doubt that he could

have had a more conventional career; it is our good fortune that he chose to devote himself to creating music rather than playing the standard repertory.

"Improvisation" is a loaded word, and Goldstein was careful to explain, in a wide-ranging discussion the day after his concert, that freedom does not mean anarchy. While the performer does have choice about what sound he will play at any given moments, the parameters of the piece are defined by the composer.

In this, Goldstein is literally radical but not new, in that sense of returning to roots. Baroque music is exactly composed, but with plenty of space for the creativity of the performer.

Goldstein's performance shone with an intensity and sonority that was totally satisfying, whether in his ensemble compositions, which included taped sounds and sometimes slide projections, or in the mesmerizing *Soundings*, in which Goldstein thoroughly explored the possibilities of the violin. One would not have been surprised to see flames coming out of the instruments, or his ears, or both!

Space limitations always dictate severe choices, and I have reserved little of it for the "stars" of *Tone Roads West*, poet/composer Jackson MacLow and poet Carolyn Forché. I felt it was more important to discuss New Mexico-based artists.

At 60, Jackson MacLow is still a searching, questing man, and he won all hearts when, during a discussion with Malcolm Goldstein, he reminded us: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with they might." If there are any rules to art, this is a cardinal one, and MacLow knows this to the marrow of his bones. The results, however, were equivocal. MacLow is noted for his explorations of verbal sounds divorced from conventional meaning. This is fascinating to the person who is doing it, but not usually transferable.

Carolyn Forché is a thoughtful and forceful person, as indicated by the talk she gave on El Salvador and in a smaller discussion on the same somber topic. I did not hear her read because I was simply too exhausted. Mea culpa.

There is also little space to talk about the pride of poets from New Mexico who read. The most forceful was Joy Harjo who combined rhythmic vitality with non-cliche imagery. The gods be thanked, she did not read (as so many do) in one of those wispy, apologetic, high little girl voices that reminds one of Jackie Kennedy.

The final event of the Festival was a performance by Charles Amirkhanian of Berkeley of a work utilizing tape, "music," text-sound, and projections by Carol Law. This reminded me of the chic/hip underground movies I used to see at the old Italian Hall in North Beach in the '50s. Not a cliché was missed. The money would have been much better spent to bring Pauline Oliveros or Kay Gardner to the Festival. While the organizers were careful to include a female poet at every reading, it still apparently did not occur to anybody that women write music.

Tone Roads West was preceded by the world premiere at C.G. Rein Gallery of Woody Vasulka's video "opera" *The Commission*.

The plot is operatic indeed: the 19th century composer Hector Berlioz was ostensibly commissioned to compose a work for the notorious violinist Niccolò Paganini who was very widely believed to be the devil. The commission turned out to be a fraud. Even more bizarre was the odyssey of Paganini's corpse, with which *The Commission* is largely concerned.

If music is "organized sound", as Edgar Varese averred, then *The Commission* is a musical work. But it was more electronically manipulated chant and narrative. As with most endeavors in this field, because it was done by a person not principally a composer, it was peculiarly truncated and undeveloped; splendid opportunities to play with sound were allowed to slide by.

However, video is not basically sound but image. In *The Commission*, montage, crosscut, wipe, fade and computer manipulation of image were used to the hilt. The imagery was sometimes riveting, but just as often exhausting. No matter how accustomed one is to television commercials, scores and scores of images flashed rapidly upon the retina is overload.

— Joanne Forman

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