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A Bit Of Sonic Terror

Wednesday, September 16, 2009

ROBERT MOYNIHAN
REVIEW

Carleton Clay arranged this concert, his second featuring the sisters Parnas: Madalyn (violin) and Cicely (cello). Both, still in their teens, are mature and striking artists.

Two years ago, they ignited musical fireworks on the Fourth of July at the Windfall Dutch Barn, Salt Springville. Sept. 8, at SUNY Oneonta, they traversed the halls of modernism from Honegger to Martinu.

Clay has worked for more than three decades to bring greater appreciation of fine music to Otsego County, founding a conservatory and bringing musicians like the excellent conductor Charles Schneider to the area. Clay's range of appreciation for the culture of composition and performance embraces the "classics," the magnificent repository of European music, to what is called "ethno-musicology," everything outside the limits of Bach to Bartok.

These levels of cultural translation were much in evidence the second Tuesday in September – for the compositions from Honegger to Martinu covered much of the territories of modernism.

If one has not listened to modern serious music, there is one technique that might be successful, like Stravinsky and Bartok, until the "language" becomes familiar.

The chief techniques of modernism, displayed in this concert, are the rapid changes of key and time values, the breaking of melodic lines into fragments, and the elevation of discontinuity into expression.

Once the ear adjusts, however, there are new plateaus of appreciation in these contemporary forms, related, perhaps, to reading good literature in a foreign language.

The two most arresting works in this concert, and the most virtuosic, were Arthur Honegger's Sonatina and Martinu's Duo.

The language of the first is not the French expression of Ravel or Poulenc – with their surface polish and relative accessibility.

Honegger's work is filled with surprises of broken phrases, unexpected harmonics, and serious utterance relieved by quick turns of humor.

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It wanders over key and tempo changes like an expert mountaineer climbing the high ridges of gravity's pull – leaping from one secure footing to another. The Martinu is one of the finest compositions of that composer.

His work can be prone to the yawns of repetition – such as his tedious piano concertos. This work, however, absorbed the full flavors of the Eastern European folk idioms – with a stunning cadenza for the cello mightily dispatched by 17-year-old Cicely.

The influence of Zoltan Kodaly's Sonata for Solo Cello was neatly tucked into this work, a tribute to the musical language of a slightly older master.

If any listener cares enough to enter another territory filled with surprise and, at times, just a bit of sonic terror, let him travel to these modern works. The escape from repetition is found in the surprise of the new, the unexpected.

Modern art removes the customary, the tried and often untrue – so that new life begins with alert experience.

These two young performers are blessed with talent sent from the muses' highest mountain. Thanks to Carleton Clay for arranging this salute to youth, virtuosity and the surprises of artistic modernism.

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