

LIVE EVENTS

I Hear Art at the Museum

B.L.C. and Mark Greenfest ©2003

Richard Festinger: *The Coming of Age*. Text by Denis Johnson. Amy Burton, soprano; The Group for Contemporary Music/ Bradley Lubman. Presented by Works in Process at the Guggenheim Museum (Peter B. Lewis Theater). NY, NY May 18/19, 2003.

No one can quarrel with the notion that our great museums must make a commitment to disciplines beyond the display of the world's visual treasures, their main *raison d'être*, of course. It is in fact the case that in many cities that is where you go for the best opportunities to hear the chamber music of the Classical and Romantic traditions played by the finest performers. But what about contemporary music? Only recently have our bastions of contemporary art begun to establish programs with living composers and their finest interpreters in mind so as to share the spotlight with De Kooning, Bacon, Rauschenberg, Rothko, Johns, Pollock and all the celebrated visual artists of the last 50 or 60 years, a movement that would seem natural enough.

Works and Process at the Guggenheim is an outstanding example of such programming, thanks to the vision of Mary Sharp Cronson, who conceived the idea in 1984. That title has been carefully chosen to meet the full concept, i.e., an investigation of the creative process with lectures and discussions. This evening's event hosted cellist Fred Sherry as moderator of a talk with the two artists. The segment, boldly placed during the intermission (technically, an interruption in the performance), gave the audience a brief glimpse of how the collaboration between Messrs. Festinger and Johnson took place.

To digress just for a moment, it was interesting to note that the series planners had scheduled for June a performance of Rameau's opera *Les Boréades* by William Christie and his Les Arts Florissant. Mr. Christie's presentations, to us so impeccably transporting of time and place, serve as a wonderful example of our social expansion so as to provide a theater audience with a genuine taste of 17th century aristocratic entertainment without the requirement of membership in the aristocracy nor of the need to put on tight britches and powdered wigs. We raise this point because (1) Mr. Christie should be appreciated by those who want tradition to remain essential, and (2) witnessing his performances brings up the question of whether Western art has changed all that much. Mr. Festinger uses today's chromatic scales quite delicately in *Coming of Age*. France is a major historical focal point for the acceptance of new musical scales, and Debussy, certainly, remains an important chronological link between the ancient proclivities and today's musical fashions.

Festinger: "... a delicate balance between lusty emotions and ... subtle colors"

Then too, if in several hundred years the sources of inspiration have shifted from mythologic to everyday, true aesthetic sensibilities have not. If Mr. Johnson in his poetry makes references to his typewriter, a suffering tango, his black Chevrolet and the sun at ninety miles an hour, he can also enmesh his ideas into lines like

... there is the chance there will be
the singing of the voiceless
unraveling into the enclosed
emptiness a silence
drawn taut so
slowly its
high music encounters
us before
it begins, and we are dancing.

Needless to say, a composer of lesser sensibility than Mr. Festinger could have drowned such words in a soupy line played by heavy strings. Instead, he has kept a delicate balance between the lusty emotions of physical love and the subtle variety of colors such emotions produce by resorting to a six-piece group intent on quietly luminous mood changes. The words themselves are expressed in the soprano's lines, which emerge and submerge, paralleling those alternating moments of consciousness and absorption. Amy Burton's vocal gifts stood out splendidly and the group under the increasingly sophisticated leadership of young Bradley Lubman, played with remarkable subtlety without the slightest bit of murkiness.

The group is comprised of flutist Rachel Rudich, clarinetist Alan R. Kay, violinist Curtis Macomber, violist Misha Amory, cellist Gregory Hesselink and pianist Molly Morkoski. ◊

Mad Dreams and Englishmen ...

Sean Hickey ©2003

GC Contemporary Ensemble 'Scenes from the Edge.' Ben Bierman: *Beyond Romance* ~ Andrea La Rose: *advertising changed my life* ~ Jennifer L. Griffith: *Dream President* ~ Peter Kirn: *Dreams on the Seine* (excerpt) ~ Peter Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. Baisley Powell. Elebash Recital Hall, CUNY Graduate Center. May 21st

The CUNY Graduate Recital Hall was the scene of some intense and enjoyable music theater by a fine mixture of composers, many of them new to me. Ben Bierman's *Beyond Romance* is a two-person theater piece in progress from which we heard three songs. Soprano Heather Feldman and tenor Sean Mahony were joined by an instrumental quartet (the composer on trumpet) in some nostalgic and lively songs, the third of which builds upon a memorably jazzy ostinato. Melodic and interesting but the voices were swallowed up on several occasions by the quartet at full tilt.

Andrea La Rose's *advertising changed my life* is pure theatre, the scene being a crowded R train (Union St. to Union Square) during the morning rush. Benjamin de la Fuente was marvelous as a train conductor ("Canal Street. Transfer J,M,Z and downtown 6") and a homeless man, and La Rose got the squeaking of rails and the closing of subway doors just right. Motoric piano and a suitable metallic percussion battery made this a rather fun diversion.

Jennifer Louis Griffith's *Dream President* was no less entertaining. Sample a few lines: "Have you been naughty again? Do I have to punish you for taking advantage of that — employee? Drop your pants and come to your mistress, you bad little boy!" and you might get the drift. Griffith pairs a seductively-attired