

SoundaXis Blog by John Oliver 06/08/06

Les AMIS Concerts a discovery

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Les AMIS Concerts present an evening at the Music Gallery called *Xenakis and his contemporaries* June 6, 8 pm.

Young musicians are embracing the music of the 20th century like never before. Violinist Lynn Kuo and cellist Rachel Mercer are two such musicians, who opened the program with a spirited rendition of the short duo *Hunem-Iduhey* that Xenakis wrote for violinists Yehudi Menuhin and Edna Mitchell in 1996. This is a fast-paced polyphonic duo/duel that gives us some fine sonorities at the resting points in the action. A great opener to the concert.

Next came Serbian guest-pianist Nada Kolundzija to lull us to trance with Morton Feldman's *Palais de Mari*, one of Feldman's last compositions. The often-repeated three-note opening material that ends by a fourth note at the major seventh set the stage for a sound object that would be examined as if under a microscope for the next 15-20 minutes, always at a soft volume. Ms. Kolundzija played each note like a special soft-mallet gong and held us to the end.

Rachel Mercer delighted us with a performance of *Kottos*, digging mercilessly into the first sound of the piece, a grinding noise created by pushing the bow into 2 or 3 strings and pressing very hard.

The sliding harmonic notes material that becomes the main focus gets opposed several times by the grinding noise. New material is introduced off the tail-end of one of these grinds, the transformation of a single note using various bowing techniques. Later on, a folk-like minimalism appears. The complex structure of the piece is full of marvelous detailed writing that is clearly conceived of by Xenakis with nothing left to chance, and nothing seeming to be beyond the capabilities of the performer, as is the case with the last piece heard on the program. The whole requires an incredible control of ferocity and delicacy that Ms. Mercer pulled off. I hope this work becomes part of this musician's repertoire. Although the difficulty of performing Xenakis remains, the stigma that Xenakis' music is "ugly" disappears as more and more musicians understand and embrace the devastating beauty and communicate it through performance.

After the intermission we heard Ms. Kolundzija perform *Klavieretude - An Tasten* (1977) by Mauricio Kagel. If this is a study, as the title suggests, it is nothing less than a study in post-modernism. The core melodic material, dominated by the major third, is played in octaves or double-octaves, and summons up, at different moments during the course of the work, the piano idiosyncracies of Phillip Glass, Rachmaninoff, Eric Satie, and tango piano. But the interest comes when the material is pushed into spectral overload (by playing fast and loud) so that, despite the "tonal" music, the "cadences" are more often determined by density and speed rather than the more traditional voice-leading resolution, although the latter play a role throughout a piece that is continuously deceptive. This is a masterpiece of the piano literature and is a work that should be heard regularly. Ms. Kolundzija's performance was masterful.

Last on the program was Xenakis' *Evrjali* (1973) for solo piano. Xenakis created a graphic that he proposes the pianist try to play but he does not expect the performer to play all of the notes. Some of the music is acknowledged to be impossible to play. This "drawn music" used to present me with a problem because the actual sounds that come out of the piano are not equal in their sound structure and so the search for equivalencies to the drawing are elusive. The Medusa's hair polyphony is dense and clogged in the lower registers and sparkling in the higher registers. The remapping of notes from the lowest we hear to the highest in a one-to-one ratio is acoustically problematic. Anyway, all this to say that *Evrjali* clarifies the issues in the debate between the abstract and symbolic approach to composition and the experiential or phenomenological approach. Ms. Kolundzija gave a compelling rendition of a work that sounds different each time it is performed.