

The Boston Globe

MUSIC REVIEW

Tanglewood festival sounds themes of diversity and coalescence



“It’s like you’re changing channels” - that’s how Augusta Read Thomas, director of this year’s Festival of Contemporary Music at Tanglewood, described her programming to Richard Dyer, the former Globe critic, in Monday’s pre-concert conversation. Dyer, for his part, called it “the most diverse” he had attended. The festival’s second half continued that consistent inconsistency.

Still, some patterns emerged. Sunday night’s concert featured varying episodic strategies. On the juxtaposition side, Tansy Davies’s septet “neon” offered a rock-influenced, ADHD minimalism; Tanglewood Music Center fellow Ryan McAdams led a pithy performance. By comparison, Mario Davidovsky’s futurist-flamenco “Festino” (with guest guitarist Oren Fader) and Ivan Fedele’s modernist-Puccini “Maja” (soprano Elizabeth Baldwin fronting a sextet led by conducting fellow Manuel Nawri) aimed for snapshot immediacy, ensembles moving in formation from sonic image to sonic image. (An outlier was Bent Sorenson’s “The Shadows of Silence,” pianist Elena Doubovitskaya mapping a tintinnabulating, monochromatic landscape of half-remembered Romanticism.)

Helen Grime's Clarinet Concerto (a premiere) opted for simultaneity, a teeming hive of angular fragments, but the music didn't come alive until its slowed-up end, clarinet (Brent Besner, agile and assured) and ensemble (conducted by fellow Gergely Madaras) trading and transmuting eerie lines. The evening's other premiere, "Zukofsky Songs," the latest from prolific centenarian Elliott Carter, showed how simultaneity is done: soprano Lucy Shelton and Boston Symphony clarinetist Thomas Martin giving split-screen views of nine Louis Zukofsky poems, sometimes from varying angles, sometimes from varying narrative distances.

Monday night brought the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra to the stage. The first half carried nationalistic echoes. Enrico Chapela's "Ínguesu" orchestrally maps the 1999 FIFA Confederations Cup final, in which Mexico upset Brazil: individual players represented by individual instruments, the structure matching the match's ebb and flow, the conductor-referee even flashing yellow and red cards. But the exuberance also echoed the piled-up rhythms of Latin American composers like Revueltas and Ginastera. Julian Anderson's "Shir Hashirim," a gorgeous Song of Songs setting (gorgeously sung by soprano Rosa Betancourt), threaded ecstatically ornamented chant, reminiscent of Anderson's countrymen Tippett and Purcell, through a bright, saturated shimmer.

On the second half, Stephanie Nussbaum was a commanding, insinuating soloist in John Zorn's violin concerto "Contes de fées," that composer's customary quick-edit collage applied to a spiny musical dialect. It was a fine foil to the slow-dissolve, long-take cinematic sweep of Wolfgang Rihm's "Verwandlung 2: Musik für Orchester." Madaras, Nawri, and McAdams, along with FCM stalwart Stefan Asbury, were the respective conductors, drawing sharp, uninhibited performances.

After such stylistic and symphonic richness, Tuesday's solo piano recital by British new-music specialist Nicolas Hodges seemed more epilogue than finale. The program stayed within a European modernist aesthetic, one virtuosic, note-filled expressive gesture after another; even the concert's American entry, Book I of Frederic Rzewski's "Nanosonatas," fit right in, fleeting jazz and Impressionist references notwithstanding.

The congruence actually highlighted differences in temperament and efficiency: similar textures coalescing first into the cool vigor of Pierre Boulez's "Incises," then the warmer languor of Henri Dutilleux's "Trois Préludes"; Hans Thomalla's "Piano Counterpart" punctuated by Boulez's "une page d'éphéméride," the former taking 11 minutes to say what the latter seems to accomplish in three. Hodges, in superb control throughout (and opting for very old-school white tie and tails), finished the evening and festival with Michael Finnissy's "Mit Arnold Schoenberg," an homage tracing that ur-modernist's shifts of vocabulary, filtered through Finnissy's own multilayered manner. The piece closes not with Schoenberg's dodecaphony, but his on-again, off-again relationship to the classical canon, cutting off in the middle of a mid-18th-century-fragment. Contemporary music is - and has always been - unfinished business.

13/08/2009 Matthew Guerrieri

http://archive.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2009/08/13/tanglewood_festival_sounds_themes_of_diversity_and_coalescence/