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Electro-acoustic Experiences at Harvard

by David Patterson

Say hello to Hans Tutschku before the concert, and he will direct you to the “sweet spot” of the room. This past weekend was Tutschku’s second “festival” of the year, where space and technology would share the limelight. Last fall, he curated “Sound in Space Festival: The Art of Interpretation of Electro-acoustic Music” at the Fenway Center in Boston. [Several of Professor Patterson’s *BMI* reviews and articles thereon are listed here.] This spring, Tutschku was curator of a two-day festival “Jour, Contre-jour” with the Fromm Players at Harvard, held in the university’s John Knowles Paine Concert Hall Friday night and last night. (I was unable to make the Friday night concert).

So, sit in the sweet spot, or center of the room, and “Please enjoy the concerts” as Tutschku urges in his introductory program notes. Tutschku, who is Fanny P. Mason Professor of Music and Director of the Harvard University Studio for Electro-acoustic Composition, stated his premise for this festival: “large-scale ensemble works with electronics that are rarely performed in the United States” and that encompass “cyclicity, slowness, and expansion of timbre through the use of electronics.”

The festival presented works of Charles Wuorinen, *Gérard* Grisey, Jonathan Harvey, Kaija Saariaho, Alvin Lucier, and Roger Reynolds. Featured was the Boston Modern Orchestra Project made up of top-flight Boston musicians and conducted by its highly touted founder, Gil Rose. Program notes were written by BSO Assistant Director of Program Publications, Editorial, Robert Kirzinger. He is also editor of the program book for the annual Festival of Contemporary Music at Tanglewood.

With all of these heavy hitters in the lineup, one has to wonder why so few attended the Saturday night concert. Maybe it was because the concert was “free and open to all” (my father was a businessman who observed that freebies may not always draw)? Maybe too much intellectualizing, too many dissonances, no beat? Of course, one might well argue that it was actually quite a good turnout for the kind of concert it was.

To providing some perspective on thinking of the compositions at this year's Fromm Players at Harvard event as being *new*: Wuorinen's *Epithalamium* dates from 1997, Grisey's *Jour, Contre-jour* from 1979, Harvey's *Bhakti* from 1982, Saariaho's *Io* from 1986-87, Lucier's *In Memoriam* (not *Memorium* as it appears in the program) *Jon Higgins* from 1985, and Reynolds's *Personae* from 1990.

To think of these live performances as illuminating, given that space and technology are in the public eye — or ear, requires multiple experiences for purpose of comparison. Of the four works I heard (Saariaho, Lucier, Reynolds, and Wuorinen) it was Lucier's extremely lean piece for clarinet and slow-sweep pure-wave oscillator that hit home technologically and spatially in Paine Hall. As one listener put it, "There was lots of atmosphere. The sound wrapped around me." That was true for me as well. I realized, though, that I had wandered off for a good portion of the slow and rarified music that was lovely and haunting and beyond meaning, or, could I say, beyond "sound-as-signifier."

The two soloists for the evening were clarinetist Michael Norsworthy in the Lucier and violinist Gabriela Diaz the Reynolds, both taking their roles in complete control and with complete conviction.

Wuorinen's two-trumpet piece eluded me mind-wise. Saariaho's *Io* for chamber orchestra, pre-recorded sound, and electronics, and named after one of the moons of Jupiter, glistened with color and contrasts during its 16-minute "sonic landscape." It was a great joy to see Roger Reynolds take several bows to a wondrous explosion of applause from the thin but receptive and appreciative audience.

Much of what I heard still leaves me up in the air. Hearing spatially does not always come so easily. I am listening and learning. I noticed some people sitting in the balcony and wondered what their ears told them. Being so personal and individualistic, one might assume these works can be taken on any number of levels and in any number of ways.

David Patterson, Professor of Music and former Chairman of the Performing Arts Department at UMass Boston, was recipient of a Fulbright Scholar Award and the Chancellor's Distinction in Teaching Award. He studied with Nadia Boulanger and Olivier Messiaen in Paris and holds a PhD from Harvard University. www.notescape.net.