

Review



Two Triumphs (and a Puzzle)

By Heuwell Tircuit

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Left Coast Chamber Ensemble - 5/15/06

The final program of the season for the Left Coast Ensemble last week continued its ongoing Companion Commission Project with a fine addition to the string quintet repertory, Philippe Bodin's *st(r)ay* in its premiere performance. Played in the Green Room of the Veterans Building, Bodin's piece was written as a subtle companion to Schubert's great String Quintet in C Major, D. 956, which opened the evening. As filler, the program offered 2004 Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Moravec's eight-year-old *Mood Swings* for piano trio.

Like Greco-French composer Iannis Xenakis, Bodin began his studies in mathematics, architecture, and piano in France, and then — unlike Xenakis — had something of a career as an operatic baritone. That's a most unusual combination, but it just might account for his balance of proportional sound relationships with a musical understanding of the need for lyrical material. His new piece uses the same instrumentation as the Schubert Quintet: two each of violins and cellos, plus one demanding viola part.

Bodin's music is thoroughly modern and, at the same time, avoids the doctrinaire calculations of the Xenakis or Boulez sort. He's written a 12-minute piece that draws vaguely on the aesthetic values of the Schubert, especially Schubert's spectacular slow movement, which amounts to one of the most original and expressive movements in all chamber music repertory. Yet I picked up no direct quotations from it.

Bodin began, for example, by using the same textures that open Schubert's slow movement: very soft, sustained string sounds, punctuated by bits of pizzicato accompaniment, pizzicatos as soft as droplets in a light spring rain. Even his eventual dramatic passages carried a sense of demure elegance. There was no hint of Mahlerian self-pity of the "Please feel my pain" variety, and many thanks for that.

This is clearly a composer who knows about formal clarity. One hopes to hear more from him, and soon. On today's scene, such compositions lie few and far between. I've no idea what the commission fee amounted to, but it was money well spent. This feeling was evidently shared by the audience, which gave Bodin such a rousing ovation that it would not have seemed out of order to repeat the whole work on the spot. The only thing that might be held against the piece is its overly cutesy title, a thing much at odds with what is essentially a dignified composition.

I can only assume that Moravec made great strides from his 1998 *Mood Swings* to his Pulitzer Prize win two years ago. Although well-played by violinist Anna Presler, cellist Tanya Tomkins, and pianist Sarah Cahill, this was a raucous piece of quasi-Romantic exaggerations. Perhaps *Mood Swings* was an early effort of Moravec's student days; it certainly sounded so. Even basics of organizational technique failed to show themselves. If, for instance, you are going for a big climax, it takes more than making a loud texture get even louder. The inner workings of the score, such as harmonic tensions, must be strengthened. Otherwise, it's just noise, and Moravec gave us lots of that. Why *Mood Swings* was programmed leaves me puzzled.

A wonderful performance of Schubert

Schubert's C-Major Quintet is, of course, one of the great masterpieces of his final year — a year of many such, including the E-Flat-Major Mass, the *Schwanengesang* song cycle, the last three piano sonatas, the massive Ninth Symphony, and sketches for a Tenth, completion of *Moments musicaux*, and more. The list is remarkable in itself, but that the man was grievously ill the whole time renders such an output astonishing.

The quintet is long, terribly difficult in terms of capturing its smiling-through-tears mood, and often technically traitorous to play, particularly during the scherzo. (Schubert seems to have had it in for violinists during his closing years; witness the beautiful but nearly unmanageable Fantasy in C Major for violin and piano from 1827.) It's simply not reasonable violin writing, although, when it succeeds, it's a wonderfully effective composition. The high violin writing in the Scherzo is downright cruel, but it came off handsomely under Presler's fingers.

This performance was wonderful — not without minor slips here or there, but far above average. Tempos were flawless, with excellent voicing among the five musicians: violinists Presler and Phyllis Kamrin, violist-director Kurt Rohde, plus cellists Tomkins and Leighton Fong. Those same strings played the Bodin, with the excellent musicianship that had been in evidence throughout the Schubert as well.

When, at the concert, Bodin was asked to say a few words prior to his piece, he related an interesting but alarming little incident from his day. It turned out that he'd been assaulted that very afternoon in the Telegraph Hill area. "I'd expected that area to be safe," he told the audience, "but that's what you face when they're playing new music." People naturally chuckled, as, happily, Bodin didn't seem any the worse for what he'd been through a few hours before.

(Heuwell Tircuit is a composer, performer, and writer who was chief writer for *Gramophone Japan* and for 21 years a music reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He wrote previously for *Chicago's American* and the *Asahi Evening News*) © 2006 Heuwell Tircuit, all rights reserved

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