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Seen and Heard International Concert Review

The Music of Steven Stucky: American Modern Ensemble, Tenri Cultural Institute, New York City, 28.05.2006 (BH)

Partita-Pastorale, after J.S.B. (2000)

Album Leaves (2002)

Piano Quartet (2004-05)

Ad Parnassum (1998)

Boston Fancies (1985)

American Modern Ensemble

Sato Moughalian, *flute*

Meighan Stoops, *clarinet*

Curtis Macomber, *violin*

Victoria Paterson, *violin*

Junah Chung, *viola*

Dave Eggar, *cello*

Blair McMillen, *piano*

Molly Morkoski, *piano*

Tom Kolor, *percussion*

Rob Paterson, *conductor*

Until this concert, my exposure to Steven Stucky's work was limited to a live performance in 1987 of his first *Concerto for Orchestra* by Riccardo Muti and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and more recently, a recording of his *a cappella* "Whispers," one of the highlights of Chanticleer's *Our American Journey*. Thanks to the superb American Modern Ensemble and a strongly conceived program, that gap has been filled.

For its Bach celebration at the 2000 Proms, the BBC commissioned *Partita-Pastorale, after J.S.B.*, and I can't imagine they weren't delighted with what they got. Stucky's riff uses Bach's B-flat keyboard partita transposed and reorchestrated, with interruptions from other Bach works, such as the *Goldberg Variations* (Nos. 6 and 25), part of the *Italian Concerto*, the E-major *French Suite*, and some of the A-minor prelude from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The result is a fleet, entertaining "daydream about Bach" (quoting Stucky), and was lovingly, bracingly done by the AME crew, elegantly led by Rob Paterson, a composer who co-founded the group with his wife Victoria (who also manages the ensemble and plays a mean violin).

In his notes for *Album Leaves*, Stucky quotes Finnish composer Magnus Lindberg, who sees the piano as "an excellent lie detector for composers." The first of the four pieces is highly chromatic, evoking the moodiness of the late Scriabin sonatas, followed by one that resembles Ligeti in its exploration of the extreme ends of the keyboard. The third piece is a chorale, followed by the final one – a sort of scherzo – with rhythmic bursts in the middle of animation. Pianist Blair McMillen keenly characterized each one, finding contrast and drama, and further, made them look easier to play than they most likely really are. Among the hundreds of young pianists on the scene, it is easy to forget that many of them such as McMillen coexist much more comfortably with contemporary scores and their demands – demands that would have been more formidable to artists even twenty years ago.

The *Piano Quartet* is a substantial work in a single movement, sharing a "skeleton" with *Boston Fancies*, but there the similarity ends. The quartet's moods range from ominous (the opening *Risoluto*) to almost comforting (*Lento, molto cantabile*) to slightly humorous (*Scherzando e molto leggero*). As with the other works here, Stucky's language is strongly rooted in tonality, but flirting with atonality – a likeable idiom, and here creating a powerful piece that in its emotional insistence reminded me somewhat of Schnittke's Piano Quintet (although it is ultimately quite different). With four terrific musicians giving it their all – Curtis Macomber on violin, Junah Chung on viola, Dave Eggar on cello and Mr. McMillen at the piano – it couldn't have been in more assured hands. At intermission, Mr. Stucky was on hand to receive a warm ovation and further discuss his work.

Perhaps because I'm a huge fan of Paul Klee, *Ad Parnassum* seemed vividly evocative of the artist's painting and might have been the most enchanting work of the night, with adroit and passionate playing from the ensemble. Stucky channels the contrasts in Klee's work and finds in them a musical equivalent, with the artist's qualities translated into an aural dialogue between small bits and larger rumblings. Again, the AME players brought down the house with a reading teeming with detail, yet never losing sight of Stucky's larger ideas.

The program closed with *Boston Fancies*, a group of seven miniatures alternating between the "fancies" (slow and designed for pairs of instruments), and the *ritornelli* (all fast and for the entire group in a leaner mode). This is an exuberant work that unfolded in equally exuberant form under Mr. Paterson's taut direction, with particular note of Meighan Stoops' impressive control on clarinet, Thomas Kolor in expert form on percussion, Sato Moughalian in some beautiful flute work and Molly Morkoski – how many groups boast not one, but two fine pianists?

The last few years have seen an explosion of new contemporary music ensembles in New York, most of them with exceptional energy, thoughtful programming and a core of outstanding musicians culled from the legions who ache to play something more than late 19th-century Germanic repertoire. And there's an audience for their vision. In addition to the outstanding quality on display, it is a further credit to the American Modern Ensemble that on not one, but two nights – and on a holiday weekend, to boot – the Tenri space was packed with eager, attentive listeners.

Bruce Hodges

For more information: www.americanmodernensemble.com

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