

MusicWeb International
SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL CONCERT REVIEW

“Women Who Rock”: American Modern Ensemble, TheTimesCenter, New York City, 29.9.2008 (BH)

Missy Mazzoli: *Lies You Can Believe In* (2005)

Hannah Lash: *Stalk* (2008)

Alexandra du Bois: *Dopo il duol, dopo il mal* (2008)

Gabriela Lena Frank: *Adagio para Amantani* (2007)

Vivian Fung: *Miniatures* (2005)

Roshanne Etezady: *Mother of Pearl* (1998)

Laura Elise Schwendinger: *High Wire Act* (2005)

Augusta Read Thomas: *Passion Prayers* (1999)

For the inaugural concert in its new season, the American Modern Ensemble vaulted into the front ranks of New York’s contemporary music ensembles, moving to a sparkling new venue, TheTimesCenter. Open scarcely a year, the 378-seat hall is located at the base of The New York Times Building, designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop and FXFOWLE Architects. Based on this visit, I have no doubt that the space will become as iconic as several others around town. Floor-to-ceiling glass makes the back wall of the stage, with a grove of birch trees and pedestrians in the background, and most important, the sound in the space is very live and inviting, with seemingly little effort required for music to register.

So for the first time in many years, due to transportation circumstances beyond my control I arrived slightly late, and to my extreme regret had to catch Missy Mazzoli’s *Lies You Can Believe In* through the sound system in the lobby. Although adequate, it’s not the same as being inside the room, especially when you can sense electric energy inside. The title refers to an imaginary folk music, reflecting both the grittiness and calm of New York, shaped into something that might have come from gypsies lounging around in a bar on the Lower East Side. During intermission, the composer described her music as influenced by Beethoven and punk, an apt summation of a nervous interlude that emerges as much more than the sum of its parts. As performed by Victoria Paterson (violin), Danielle Farina (viola) and Arash Amini (cello), and extrapolating from their dynamic performances elsewhere in the evening, I can report that their gutsy reading was even more riveting than the version available for listening on Mazzoli’s website, here (www.missymazzoli.com).

Thus began a fascinating line-up of eight recent works called *Women Who Rock*, with six of the composers present to talk with AME’s founder Rob Paterson at intermission. Among many eye-opening comments, Roshanne Etezady recalled a fan saying, “You do not look like a composer; you look like someone who enjoys life,” an unwittingly wry assessment of how some composers are still perceived in the 21st century. I would guess that she does enjoy life, based on her appealing *Mother of Pearl* (from 1998, the oldest

work here), which takes a unison line for four instruments and interrupts it with glassy screams, then adds a winding cello solo, before a searching, passionate climax.

The second half continued with *High Wire Act* by Laura Elise Schwendinger, inspired by Alexander Calder's wire circus. Among other tools, Schwendinger uses high pitches, harmonic arpeggios and a scampering flute to create the impression of fragility and bodies aloft, somewhat uneasily. The program closed with *Passion Prayers* by Augusta Read Thomas, a sort of cello concerto compressed into about ten minutes. An intense cello line, magnetically delivered by Robert Burkhart, opens up a glittering wonderland. As the monologue continues, the cello part is caressed and surrounded by the other six instruments in turn.

The first half included harpist Jacqueline Kerrod in *Stalk*, an appealing solo that apparently came to composer Hannah Lash after she awoke from a nightmare. Dense passages alternate with more gossamer ones in a florid, introspective bit of writing. Alexandra du Bois riffs on Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* in *Dopo il duol, dopo il mal*, which I found pleasantly melancholy, maybe a little on the sweet side. Pianist Blair McMillen and Mr. Burkhart were striking in Gabriela Lena Frank's *Adagio para Amantani*, a reference to an island between Bolivia and Perú. Here a wan-sounding cello nestles against a Scriabin-esque piano, with ear-catching results. Tiny gestures evoked small island creatures struggling to emerge—but from what?

And just before intermission, Vivian Fung's *Miniatures* made a strong impression, with Ms. Paterson, Ms. Farina and Mr. Amini joined by violinist Robin Zeh, and Meighan Stoops sailing through a rhapsodically written clarinet part. The other outstanding AME musicians were Sato Moughalian (flute), Matthew Ward and Pablo Rieppi (percussion), Stephen Gosling (piano) and Mr. Paterson, who made a communicative conductor when needed.

Although the program might have had six works rather than eight, and while the intermission feature was too long, the dialogue was almost continually entertaining, even amusing, especially when Ms. Paterson made welcoming remarks. To entice shoppers and publicize the group, she held up a pair of newly minted AME underwear, surely a first in contemporary music promotional merchandise.

Bruce Hodges