

**Thursday, June 01, 2006**

**The American Modern Ensemble plays Steven Stucky at Tenri Cultural Center**

Why or how a composer reaches a plateau of professional esteem translating to awards, commissions and prestigious residencies during his lifetime remains, in the end, a mystery more elusive than the verdict of history. In truth, history has told us of composers who enjoyed great prestige during their lives only to be neglected by future generations; or of others who toiled in relative obscurity, earning canonization after their deaths. Why do some artists navigate skillfully through fame and fortune while others miss the mark in their own time? Is it that some commit to an expressive path against the thrust of a prevailing style? Or some others are based on locations without resources of marketing, connections, or funding? Is it perhaps that some know how to explain themselves to the public even before the music begins? In the end, even those composers unknown to the powers-that-be have at least a close circle of admirers who will champion their music for years to come. The reception of a work, intimate or global, coexists with it and has a meaning of its own.

For us conductors devoted to new music, the fame a living composer earns elsewhere often prompts us to examine the music with a certain diligence, if only to make sure that we remain au courant with what represents the best of the art in our time as we offer it to our audiences. I entertain these reflections because Steven Stucky seems to have reached both the plateau of professional prestige and the devotion of both powerful supporters and loyal students, as was demonstrated in the disciplined performances by the American Modern Ensemble under the direction on Rob Paterson, a former pupil, last Saturday May 27 at the Tenri Cultural Institute. The more I reflected on the performance, the more I noticed how Stucky's art involves not only his compositions, but a clear understanding of what he does and how he wishes the audience to appreciate him.



Stucky, born in 1949, has rounded up some impressive achievements, including a Pulitzer Prize in 2005 for his Second Concerto for Orchestra; an enduring relationship with the Los Angeles

Philharmonic as its composer-in-residency, the longest such relationship in the United States; a respected faculty position at Cornell University; and continuing commissions. Rob Paterson took a moment to extol the virtues of Steven Stucky as a conductor and as a writer, given that Stucky is also a respected Lutoslawski scholar. Indeed, Stucky's program notes were unassumingly articulate, managing to engage the audience with the human side of his personal quests and struggles as an artist, while carefully delineating his compositional aims and the salient features worth listening for. I dare say that Stucky's use of the program note to guide the audience's perception is masterful, and for those who read them, conducive to the full enjoyment of his music..

From the vantage point of this retrospective concert, Steven Stucky appeared first to be a neoclassicist, reconsidering historical styles and techniques. A unifying emotional atmosphere pervaded the whole program with a somewhat Mendelssohnian quality, imbued with amiability, facility, impeccable orchestration and an tendency towards balance and symmetry in the formal designs. Each instrument was always presented at its best, touching no extremes and taxing no resources. In a conversation with Paterson during intermission Stucky acknowledged imbibing from the music of Debussy, Bartok, Prokofiev and Lutoslawski. Indeed, one could clearly hear these influences as if a gracious tradition had been transmitted without the now well-known convulsions of atonality, serialism, and radical experimentalism.

As the concert went on, other composers besides those mentioned also appeared, and the early neoclassicist impression was contradicted by the fact that a linear narrative did not appear to be Stucky's main concern in the presented works. Instead, his approach resembled more that of a collector, revisiting musical gestures and textures by other composers as objects of intrinsic value worth displaying next to each other as related by his love for them. This was the overt intent in *Partita-Pastorale* after *J.S.B.*, composed for the BBC for the anniversary celebrations of Bach in 2000. Stucky connected fragments of several works by Bach with his own commentary without any extraordinary effort to establish unity. Listening to this work reminded me of architect Renzo Piano's passageway connections between the separate buildings of the Morgan Library in New York, which I had viewed earlier in the afternoon, and I rejoiced in the coincidence of the experience.

The prevalence of small formal gestures continued through *Album Leaves*, an ostensibly open-ended series of character pieces for piano with clear homages to Debussy and Prokofiev, and played with assurance and wit by Blair MacMillen. Once more the program notes established clear expectations, which as they were met, excited a warm applause from the public. In the following *Piano Quartet* however, the sense of intimidation Stucky confesses in his notes does indeed reflect in a certain emotional decorum preventing him from dwelling fully into the material. The conflicts in this quartet may offer the opportunity for a good study in the power --and perils-- of musical rhetoric for an adventurous soul somewhere. Stucky's affection for the great quartets of Mozart and Brahms transfer to his Brahmsian opening, with unison lines and bell tolls projecting a genuine dramatic intensity. However, such an opening promised emotional explorations and well-developed narratives that never took place. Alas, the rhetorical references to calls of destiny and sweeping tides of life are still too embedded in our cultural psyche since the late eighteenth-century, constantly reinforced by countless concerts of Mozart and Brahms-- and Beethoven and Mahler, and everyone else. Instead the opening was soon diluted into more relaxed and atmospheric contrasting material, maintaining small formal units even as the work progressed through the equivalent four movements. The quartet offered nonetheless the most somber emotional tonalities of the whole evening, with some reminiscences of Sibelius and parallels with another Finn, Einojuhani Rautavaara, perhaps because this composer is drinking from the same source. Throughout, the ability of pianist Molly Morkoski to project different bell-like tone colors proved essential to the discourse. Once again, Stucky's sense of symmetry triumphed, and the opening was revisited at the end.

To my ears the work that most beautifully fulfilled the concepts expressed by Stucky in his program notes was Ad Parnassum, inspired by the painting of the same name by Paul Klee. Stucky adapts Klee's concept of "polyphonic painting" for "its pointillist or mosaic approach in which grids of dense dots or squares in contrasting colors create a wonderfully rich, luminous effect." The felicity of the results lied perhaps in the extra-musical reference to the images of Paul Klee, which are now ubiquitous in our culture, and the natural sympathy between Klee's ideas and Stucky's style.

The final work Boston Fancies reinforced the perception of a common thread running through this concert and provided a summary of its achievements, both for the composer and the ensemble. Boston Fancies explores the concept of the Baroque ritornello, albeit used in constantly varied appearances and quasi-detached from its surrounding episodes by a faster tempo. The work revealed how close this approach was to the other structural concepts included in the concert. In the end all the chamber works were constructed with small formal units and loosely enchaind events cloaked in an atmosphere of genial capriciousness. The "fancies" sounded almost improvised, and provided excellent opportunities for the beautiful tones of cellist Dave Eggar and clarinetist Meighan Stoops. In the end one left the concert with a sense of having observed elegant quilts, embroidered with fanciful flowers and unicorns, charmingly designed and manufactured with consummate skill.

The American Modern Ensemble, ending an auspicious inaugural season, seemed to embrace Stucky's aesthetic through and through. I have personally collaborated with some of the ensemble's virtuoso players in projects of the more "gnarly" type, and Rob Paterson indicated that the ensemble plans to offer a concert of American mavericks next fall. It was a sign of their consummate versatility that the ensemble's presentation matched the spirit of the music in so many ways. Each of the players conveyed the technical elegance and emotional discipline of the composer and his music. The program was artfully paced from the simplest to the most complex, throwing an arching line from a recollection to Bach to an exploration of the Baroque. Paterson interviewed Stucky at intermission and they entertained questions from the audience. The ambience in the Tenri Cultural Institute enhanced the cheerful closeness between performers and the public, who applauded the ensemble warmly throughout.

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