

200 Billion Years Ago

BY KYLE GANN
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Giving the new paradigm a chance photo: Cary Conover

I have long predicted that the orchestra will someday be replaced by the acoustic chamber ensemble augmented by electronics. The way my luck with predictions runs, that probably means my great-great-grandchildren will have season tickets to the NY Phil. Nevertheless, the orchestra was an expression of pre-WW I aristocratic opulence, and has never seemed financially tenable in a democracy. But take a mixed group of virtuosi, add amplification, synthesizers, and samplers, and, voilà—you have a tenably cheap touring group with all the sonic power of the orchestra and at least as much variety. The Sequitur ensemble's January 12 concert at Merkin gave the new paradigm a chance.

Admittedly, there are still glitches, the main one being that acoustic and electronic sound sources are difficult to balance. Philip Glass's minimalist ensemble concept covered that by doubling them for a smooth blend, but a more traditionally soloistic ensemble technique leaves you vulnerable. And so Eve Beglarian's *Creating the World* (creation being the theme of the evening) ran into trouble performance-wise. Originally written for the Paul Dresher Ensemble, it was a joyous, extended dance that wove recordings of Gregorian chant, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, and Mozart concerti—plus a sampled narration—into an instrumental continuum that crescendoed into a ripping jam session at the end. I've heard the piece on CD-R, where it's highly effective; but live, there was a jarring disconnect at every switch from live sounds to electronics. The two never congealed onto the same listening plane.

The difficulty was more pervasive in the concert's centerpiece, *Cosmicomics* by Richard Carrick. This was an almost operatically ambitious multimedia piece with video (by Peter Nigrini), narration (read by Richard Lalli), and a scintillating score, each movement exploring a different textural conceit. The concept was clever, a quotidian meditation on the vastness of cosmic immensity. For instance, the narrator sees through a telescope a sign reading, "I saw you" in a galaxy 200 billion light-years away, and tries to think back what he might have been guilty of doing on that long-ago day.

Very cute. The problem was, too much competed for our attention. The music interfered with the narration, the video with both, and it wasn't a '70s-style info-overload piece where inevitable loss of meaning was the point—quite the contrary, each element had its own engaging narrative. Music from a minimalist tradition deals with this problem by doubling lines and some redundancy of rhythm, but Carrick employed more of a pointillistic, Uptown orchestration concept with too many details foregrounded. Too bad—it was fun. You kept wanting to turn off the music to hear the words, and vice versa.

Not surprisingly, the two purely acoustic pieces were easier to bring off. Carlos Carrillo's *Como si Fuera la Primavera* was interestingly independent in style, having clarinetists Michael Lowenstern and Jo-Ann Sternberg and cellist Greg Hesselink drawing brief, Romantic melodic gestures over a tonal but dissonant background of bowed antique cymbals. It was poignant in an oddly distanced way.

And the cream of the concert was a reprise of a 1987 work that by now has to count as an undersung classic of post-minimalism, Bunita Marcus's *Adam and Eve*. Marcus was a Feldman student, and her non sequitur successions of melodic figures and harmonies remind you of himbut in this sextet for flute, violin, cello, piano, and two mallet percussionists, she adds her own graceful style of arpeggios and rhythmic repetitions, and the result sucks you into a gorgeous, dreamy reverie. (You can currently hear the piece, as well as Beglarian's, on Postclassic Radio, my Internet station.) Paul Hostetter conducted a loving performance that melted in the ears. Our electroacoustic future may still be assembly required, but with pieces like this thrown in, the wait will not be onerous.

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