

ALI-ZADEH'S MUSIC SUGGESTS ENDLESS AND ENDLESSLY ORNAMENTED MELODY.

Downtown Via Azerbaijan

MASTER OF MUGHAM

BY KYLE GANN

CONTINUUM PLAYING FRANGHIZ ALI-ZADEH

Miller Theater

February 3

The gradual breakup of the Soviet Union brought to world consciousness a number of composers like Gubaidulina and Ustvolskaya, who, previously barred from using Western "decadent" and "formalist" methods, were now rapidly exploring a 20th-century modernist vocabulary that was by then in its decline here. The classical critics were thrilled, for such music seemed to give modernism a new lease on life; I found it more difficult to justify the aesthetic results of a politically imposed time warp. Then there was the Estonian Arvo Pärt, belatedly made a founder of the minimalist movement. Recently one composer, fed up with Pärt's relentless reputation for piety, wrote to me: "Doesn't the man ever fart?" I had to admit that I'd been quietly harboring a similar doubt.

But the Azerbaijani composer Franghiz Ali-Zadeh is a different story altogether. I had been fascinated by her 1993 piece that the Kronos Quartet played, *Mugan Sayagi*—a more original and personal statement, I felt, than anything I had heard from the composers named above. And so when Continuum offered an entire evening of her music, I was eager to hear more. Born in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1947, Ali-Zadeh was trained in European classical music at the Soviet-created Baku Conservatory; she first became known, in fact, for performances of music by Crumb, Cage, Webern, and other modern Western composers. Parallel to many young American composers, she felt something was missing in her pristinely circumscribed musical education, and looked around her for a vernacular closer to home.

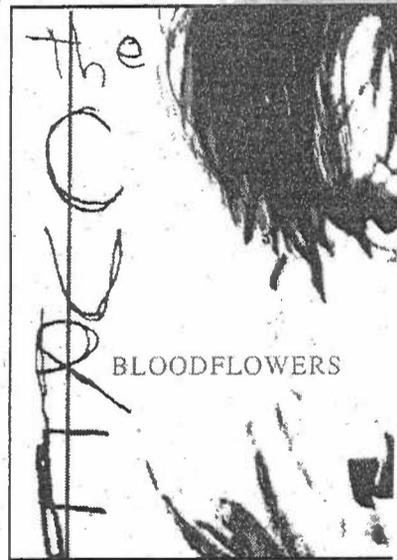
What she found, and integrated into her basically Western notated style, was *mugham*, an ecstatically improvisatory singing technique related to Turkish and Persian musics. Besides being in the exceedingly rare position of a female composer from a Muslim background, her stylistic route also makes her something of a Eurasian Downtowner: Rather than play catch-up with European styles like her Soviet-oppressed colleagues, she distanced herself from,

the European tradition to return to her roots. Consequently, her music strikes me as marked by fewer pretensions and greater authenticity.

I did expect that her early music, in this wide-ranging retrospective, would start with less well-integrated *mugham* influences and move toward more pervasive use of Arabic elements, but such wasn't the case. At least, my favorite piece was the earliest, *In Habil's Style* of 1979, and my least favorite was the most recent, *In Search of Lost Time* from 1999, although my preferences in the in-between works followed no linear pattern. *In Habil's Style* was an intense soliloquy for cello, played passionately by Kristina Reiko Cooper, with Joel Sachs accompanying her with only the most subtle rings and plinks from inside the piano. *In Search of Lost Time* for sextet, commissioned for Continuum, veered audibly from West to East and back, sometimes lapsing into a joyously sensual 6/8-metered dance, elsewhere breaking into a kind of Uptown-classical melodic fragmentation.

Ali-Zadeh's most distinctive feature is without doubt her sense of melody, or rather, line. The PR materials referred to her music as "hypnotic," which wasn't quite the right word; it's not that her music sets up any predictable rhythmic groove (although it comes close now and then), but that her melodies intently explore very small patches of terrain for a long time before moving on to something else. She's also got a distinctive timbral device: her use in several works of loosely prepared piano, usually a string of beads laid across the piano strings. The effect, continuous yet varied as one moves through the scale, is intended to imitate, and presumably does, Azerbaijani percussion instruments and dulcimer. The effect was best in *Music for Piano* of 1989, a stream of endless and endlessly ornamented melody that Cheryl Seltzer ripped through with powerful emotionality.

Likewise, soprano Martha Elliott sang Ali-Zadeh's *Three Watercolors* with a light, lithe, vivaciously nuanced voice that made the Azerbaijani text charming. Sachs conducted an 11-piece ensemble in *Crossing II*, which spent many minutes sliding chromatically around a drone pitch, like Giacinto Scelsi, but finally evolved into a strange, Satie-esque collage of waltz and march elements. Ali-Zadeh is an unusually complex figure, and this retrospective was not enough to define her. Her music contains many elements that don't quite seem to have coalesced yet, but that are often combined with thrilling musicianship. And she is clearly one of the most interesting figures Eastern Europe has produced in the last few decades. ▮

ON SALE • IN STORES
www.towerrecords.comTracy Chapman
TELLING STORIESThe Cure
BLOODFLOWERSTOWER
RECORDS • VIDEO • BOOK
www.towerrecords.com