

Your Roots Are Showing

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, MARCH 4, 2003 AT 4 A.M.



Elodie Lauten plays the cello with Petr Kotik (right), artistic director of the SEM Ensemble.

photo: Hiroyuki Ito

The orchestra is the great leveler. Forged in the 19th century, cryogenically frozen at the beginning of the 20th, it embodies the Romantic era's massive gravitational pull. Despite all your ingenuity it remains a pipe organ with three manuals: woodwinds, brass, strings, with percussion for sound effects. And so whatever zany great mind you commission to write an orchestra piece, the medium's ineluctably homogenizing force zips the music through a time warp and sends it barreling back to the past.

Take Elodie Lauten. She's a major postminimalist talent, an improviser who channels her somewhat Terry Riley-ish melodies through harmonic systems determined by mystical correspondences. Her music, usually synthesizer-based, shimmers, soothes, bristles at times with harmonic ambiguity. And I've been awaiting the premiere of her *Symphony 2001*, her first orchestra piece, which finally occurred February 13 at Willow Place Auditorium, thanks to farsighted Petr Kotik conducting the SEM Orchestra. In seven brief movements, the work is perhaps the first true postminimalist symphony, or at least the first after Philip Glass's five. Following minimalist tradition, some movements kept the entire orchestra busy throughout, rather than coloristically alternating between tone colors. Some passages repeated propulsive rhythmic patterns over and over, others pitted fast string melodies against slow brass. Four percussionists provided the trademark Lautenesque shimmer, and in the finale vibraphone riffs came sweeping up out of center range in an exciting, not-at-all-minimalist manner.

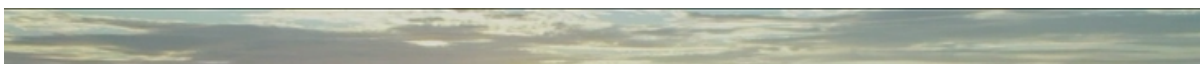
Exciting, effective, much in Lauten's dense but lively modal style. Yet the fact that the piece was

for orchestra took the shiny glaze of newness off and evoked names from the past: Colin McPhee, Lou Harrison, Virgil Thomson. Hearing it made you realize how much hipness is in the medium. Subtract the medium, and Lauten falls into the same American modal, Eastern-influenced tradition as all those early gamelan-smitten composers of the 1930s. Just like the Glenn Branca string quartet played by the Cassatt Quartet several years ago: very nice, but it suddenly exposed that raucous guitar banger as a spitting image of Henry Cowell's mild middle period.

Likewise with the piece from the opposite end of the SEM Orchestra's spectrum, *Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City* by Roscoe Mitchell. My readers will know Mitchell as one of the more uninhibited members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the nose-thumbing improv group that restored an Afrocentric ethos to post-jazz music. Yet Mitchell's orchestra piece, setting a poem by fellow AEC chum Joseph Jarman for baritone Thomas Buckner, was the evening's most "classical" work. His texture was a Schoenbergian counterpoint of dissonant motives and ambiguous tonality, made American by the abstractly swinging use of piano and percussion. In fact, the piece harked back to an earlier tradition, the jazz-tinged urban modernism of black composers like Ulysses Kay, George Walker, and Hale Smith. Mitchell may be post-1980s-free-improv at heart, but weight him down with an orchestra and he'll kick back with the same reflexes jazzers have given in that context for 60 years.

The other four works on Kotik's generously adventurous concert were by composers I'd heard little else by for comparison, if anything. Rain Worthington's *Yet Still Night* was a charming poem of chromatic impressionism, laced with wan snatches of melody over a texture of chromatic intervals, closer to Griffes or Scriabin or the mystical mode of Ruth Crawford than to Debussy. *Eroding the Helix* by young, just-out-of-grad-school Peter Flint was a snazzy, slickly orchestrated essay in percussion-limed syncopations revealing more ambition than originality; it called to mind John Alden Carpenter's jazz-styled pieces like *Skyscrapers*. Most quixotically, an improvising musician who goes by the name mr dorgon avoided the orchestration question altogether by having the entire ensemble, in a piece called *IS #10*, improvise for a few minutes at maximum dynamic and chaos level. It cleared one's aural palate.

The one work that called no previous composer to mind didn't use the orchestra very idiomatically. Frances White's *Singing Bridge* for strings imitated the traffic sounds over a bridge she fancies that spans the Delaware River at Stockton, N.J. Sustained pitches, extremely high and extremely low, slowly glissanded into relationships sharply dissonant at some points and harmonic at others. Austere, if restful, it showed the lengths you have to go to with an orchestra to avoid sounding like your forebears.





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