

Out of the Depths

Part of the text of Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis*, from Oscar Wilde's letter written in Reading Gaol: "On November 13, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock until half past two on that day I had to stand on the center platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. When people saw me they laughed. Each train swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time."

—K.G.

Chops To Spare

Anthony de Mare

February 1
Merkin Hall

BY KYLE GANN



CHRISTOPHER BIERLEIN

De Mare: what do we do with our virtuosos?

Virtuosity's a bore. Oh, I don't mean the old kind: Liszt, Chopin, and that crowd. But the difficult music of today is so full of brain-stumping cross-rhythms and scary leaps across the range of the instrument that I sometimes want to walk on stage and cordon off the beat-counting, score-staring, huffing-and-puffing performers with signs that say MEN AT WORK. In this late 20th century, we have no counterpart to Mozart's or Schubert's works, whose finger-stretching difficulty has to be hidden beneath a veneer of seeming effortlessness. Our hard music sounds laborious. And face it, we let a hell of a lot of empty music scrape by on the grounds that it gives the players an athletic workout. It's easy to turn away from a work's incomprehensibility toward the patent exertions of the performers who managed to get through it, and utter that most vapid of musical compliments, "It's so well written for the instruments." Sure: if Beethoven hadn't had any ideas, he

could have fit his music to the instruments, too.

So what do we do with our virtuosos?

I wish I knew, for at Anthony de Mare's concert I had a by-now-familiar experience—the music I enjoyed and the music that showed off his tremendous technique were never the same. De Mare plays bigger than life: his softs are *pppp*, his louds *ffff*, he's

got steely discipline and no inhibitions, and he projects every work in such bold, well-contrasted terms that it can't help but stick in your memory. When he plays a piece, it stays played. This evening, however, his chops seemed about 80 per cent superfluous, for the best pieces he offered required little dexterity.

The virtuoso showpieces were Paul Moravec's *Piano Triptych*—three brief, earnestly tortured vignettes in a tired, gestural modernist idiom—and *Adiós Nonino* by the ever-overrated tango master Astor Piazzolla. The latter aimed for the vacant shell of a grand romantic style, but its phrases were too short and crabbed, with no emotional follow-through. The easier pieces were newer, fresher. The prettiest, a transcription of an aria from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* by Canadian Rodney Sharman, swung quietly between single notes and lush, impressionistic chords. Michael Gordon's *Hate* punctuated a spoken litany of hate crimes with harsh octaves and

repeated notes, strident enough to match the feelings aroused by the text. And in *RE: TdM(are)* by Venezuelan Gustavo Matamoros, de Mare's notes triggered samples of his own voice, with his comments about playing ("The piano allows me to play quiet notes easily. . .") as a kind of self-portrait. De Mare's extroverted theatricality inspires composers to include his voice in the pieces they write for him.

The only problem with the easy composers, those who rejected modernist clichés, is that they all tend to write one-idea pieces; postminimalism hasn't developed strategies for moving from one texture to another. The sole exception was Bernadette Speach, whose *When It Rains, Llueve* jumped gently among stark, recurring images, like a cross between Morton Feldman and Erik Satie (both of whom had a cinematic sense of intercutting). And de Mare ended with Frederic Rzewski's piano oratorio on Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, a work whose virtuosity transcends pianism into a kind of ritual soul-baring. Most good works don't need virtuosity, and for the best, mere virtuosity is not enough. ❖

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