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Judith Sainte Croix: an ear for gorgeously original textures

Going Native

Judith Sainte Croix
Merkin Hall

BY KYLE GANN

In this artificial era we worship "the Natural." But for hundreds of years, composers only evoked nature at odd moments. First came bird calls, from the "cucu" in the 13th-century round "Sumer is icumen in" to the flute tweeps in Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and beyond. Haydn mimicked the robust working rhythms of the peasant in *The Seasons*, Mahler dotted his orchestral mountain-sides with clanking cowbells.

After World War II and the collapse of some cherished myths about civilization, however, the appeal to nature became urgent, as well as pervasive and metaphorical: John Cage's tranquil randomness, Xenakis's noisy physics, Harry Partch's "natural" harmonies, Steve Reich's "natural" processes. Now every other new composer trumpets his or her discovery of true reality. The dazzling succession of strategies, each contradicting the last, drives home the point that no depiction of nature is anything more than a convention. Nature itself remains elusive.

Several recent composers have turned to Native American spirituality for their nature fix: Janice Giteck, Peter Garland, Jerome Kitzke. To no one is this vein more central than to Judith Sainte Croix, a Minnesota composer whom New York doesn't hear from often, but who recently made a major bid for attention. Although she copiously acknowledges her debts to Native American culture, her music doesn't often give the sense that Indian melodies are being quoted—or rather, "appropriated," to use a politically charged term that is too thoughtlessly banded about. Instead, she has her performers chant phrases, allows the occasional odd-rhythmed drum beat, draws eerie glissandos from wooden Native flutes, and paints landscapes with chords sustained and repeated in motionless fervor. In short, by aiming at ecstatic spirituality with non-European derived rhythms and motives, she arrives at a music externally similar to that of Olivier Messiaen.

That's not to say Sainte Croix's music sounds like Messiaen's. Just as his music is full of instantly recognizable idiosyncrasies, she has her own: streams of Lisztian octaves, sweeping impressionist harmonies, sudden explosive interruptions, pretty walls of downward-repeating arpeggios, bursts of noise to ground the music in the earth. These were all nicely packaged in a large piano work she played herself, *Tukwinong* (*Cumulus Cloud*) *Kachina Prelude*. They reappeared as well in *The Bright Leaf Trios*, which she

played with flutist Lisa Arkis and cellist Daniel Barrett, and in two larger works illustrative of Native American history, *Vision I* and *Vision II*.

Sainte Croix's strongest asset is her ear for gorgeously original textures. In *Vision II*, a string trio provided a sumptuous arpeggio background for the oboe and Native American flute solos of Matt Sullivan, then switched abruptly to a disarming texture of plaintive short glissandos. One movement of *The Bright Leaf Trios* proved that she isn't afraid to cling to one vibrant chord for a half-minute or more, and in her chamber orchestra piece, *Vision I*, the group would suddenly pause for one of Andrew Bolotowsky's spooky wooden-flute rips before plunging back into fevered counterpoint (reminding me slightly of the electronic Ondes Martenot in Messiaen's *Turangalila*). Despite her arguably postminimalist tendencies, Sainte Croix has a refreshing lack of interest in the one-idea piece, and is fearless about turning her music on a dime and racing off at a right angle.

What I found distracting were the intermittent dots of natural sound: the rain stick and wind chimes in *Vision I*, the strummed piano strings in *Tukwinong*, the vocal whooshing sounds in *The Bright Leaf Trios*. Downtown composers since Henry Cowell (if I may claim him for Downtown, and I will) have known that to make such weird noises work, you have to focus on them relentlessly and develop them until they come to sound, er, natural. The musical context Sainte Croix maintained was so "classical," so framed in harmonic tensions and conventional musical narrative, that the noises came off as affectation, pasted on. In short, they made a superficial appeal to the world of natural sounds such as wind and rain, and interrupted the far more profound appeal to spiritual nature made through the music's vivid stasis and lightning-quick transformations.

Such oddities are hardly typical of Sainte Croix alone; she was educated in the Midwest (as I was), where rain sticks and wind chimes are endemically overused, part of the local lingua franca. They detracted little from music performed with such self-assurance and verve. Uptown in her performing conventions and virtuosity, Downtown in her cheerful acceptance of both noisy dissonance and motionless consonance, Sainte Croix is really neither, and has clearly developed her own aesthetic influenced by global and historical, not musical, politics. She comes to New York as one of those occasional blasts of fresh air from a larger world that are, after all, another way of taking us back to nature.

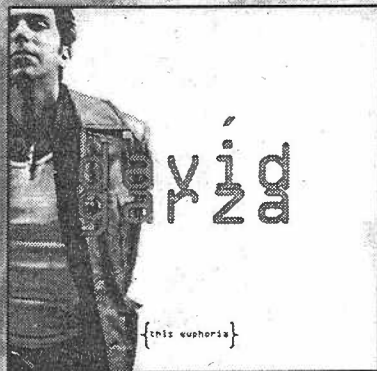
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