

Moon Rising Fast

BY KYLE GANN

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Post-minimalist, sorta: the ensemble conducted by Sarah Ioannides

photo: Cary Conover

Beata Moon is self-taught as a composer. Not as a musician; in fact, she graduated from Juilliard as a pianist, and is that rare performer, one who turns to composing a little later than composers normally start. (Flutist-composer Elizabeth Brown, also from Juilliard, is another who comes to mind.) I would call Moon's music post-minimalist, but it doesn't give the impression that she composed it with Steve Reich or Terry Riley in mind. Rather it seems historically naive, dipping lightly into Copland and Messiaen, but really bubbling up out of her own imagination, as though she has crossed paths with the post-minimalists only by coincidence.

And from having only begun a few years ago, Moon is fulfilling her ambitions with celerity. She has put together her own group, the Beata Moon Ensemble—actually a 21-piece chamber orchestra full of crack players, herself presiding from the piano—to play her own music and that of others. I guess that's what having gone to Juilliard will do for you: You come out knowing people. The group gave its February 22 debut in an auspicious venue, Miller Theatre at Columbia, in a concert in which all the performers were women, ditto all the composers, and all the performances were crisp and fiery. I like to see young composers struggle awhile, so I can write virtuous articles lamenting how unfair it is that they have to struggle, but Moon has gone from zero to 60 before I had a chance to give her a push.

The pieces played were drawn from Uptown, Downtown, and history, and yet they all seemed to belong together. Ruth Crawford, whose centennial was widely celebrated last year, was honored with her *Music for Small Orchestra*, a stunningly precocious work in which the then 25-year-old composer fused the mysticism of theosophy with the rhythmic techniques of Henry Cowell. The

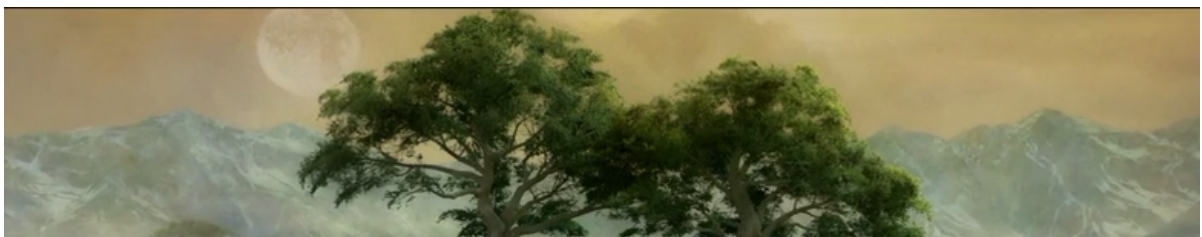
composer fused the mysticism of theosophy with the rhythmic techniques of Henry Cowell. The first movement is one of the best things Crawford ever wrote, yet the piece has remained obscure; I had never heard it live, other Crawford fans I spoke to had never heard it at all, but conductor Sarah Ioannides brought it together with a languid atmosphere that made it sound like Ives, surpassing in blended moodiness the one recorded performance on disc by the Boston Musica Viva.

Having proved that they could handle 1920s Scriabin-esque mysticism, the group also proved their Downtown chops by giving a sharply precise reading to *Lick*, the most rock-influenced piece Julia Wolfe has yet written: a stuttering post-minimalist assemblage of drum breaks and guitar riffs. Tania Leon's *Indigena* took a more dialectical approach to Uptown/Downtown differences. It started off abstractly with atonal gestures in a thin, solo-laden texture, but a humorous trumpet solo seemed to be the signal for a tonal and infectious rhythmic dance. You could sort of tell that the indigenous peoples hinted at in the title got fed up with living in White Man's Land and started hopping to a different beat.

Two of the other works were not my favorite examples by their composers. I've appreciated Elena Kats-Chernin's post-minimal pointillism in the past, but her thoughtfully angry Concertino for Violin and Chamber Orchestra—played with vibrant élan by soloist Lara St. John, who had enough commitment to memorize her complex part—was pervaded by a gray atonality, with half-steps so ubiquitous as to be more of a nervous tic than a meaningful melodic motive. Likewise, *Telluris Theoria Sacra* was Anne LeBaron's doctoral dissertation at Columbia some years ago: extremely convoluted in form, as befitting both title and occasion, and couched in flighty gestures leading nowhere. LeBaron is generally more Downtown and enjoyable—or am I being redundant?—than this piece makes her sound.

Then there was Moon's own world premiere, a jaunty work titled *Fission*. Her trademark, present here, is odd-rhythmed ostinatos of 11, 13, 17 beats, flying by and changing too fast to count, with simple sound images that stick in the memory. There was something Ruth Crawford-esque about having such repeated figures in the chimes, and when the work relaxed, its motoric exertions gave way to an unselfconscious romanticism. There's something charmingly at-ease and untortured about Moon's music, and also about the way she's put together this huge chamber orchestra of virtuosos and hit the ground running. Like, who knew it was so easy to become a composer?

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