

Orchestral Maneuvers

The Crosstown Ensemble

Tribeca Hall
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BY KYLE GANN

Writing new music for orchestra is like building a digital abacus. Everything about the dinosaur's pipe-organ-like division into blended choirs of strings, winds, and brass bears the imprint of the stodgy, pious, well-blended 19th century. No matter what new tunes and rhythms you write, the end result will sound like inept Romanticism. Or else you can explode the beats, make it coloristic, pointillistic, and unidiomatic—the usual 20th-century solution—in which case it just sounds bad.

Unless—and that's a wistful "unless"—you can manage to make the damn thing sound *not* like an orchestra. In that respect, composers working with samplers have a distinct advantage over their more traditional colleagues. So suggested the evidence given by the Crosstown Ensemble's performance of world premieres by two Downtowners, Eve Beglarian and Annie Gosfield. It may not be quite cricket to call conductor Eric Grunin's wind-and-percussion-heavy ensemble an orchestra, but it's a large-enough group to demand orchestral



Eve Beglarian and Annie Gosfield: techno-heads take on the orchestra.

strategies from techno-heads not accustomed to the challenge.

It's difficult to make music sound *deliberately* mistuned, but Gosfield, a sophisticated sampler programmer, has a knack for it. As Grunin raised his baton on her *Lost Night*, the strings seemed to be tuning up. Eventually

you realized the piece had started, and a roar of cymbals steered it in the direction of noise, while unleashing an Ivesian clangor of trills, glissandos, and pounding bass. Gosfield's best effect was a startling illusion. Early on, Nurit Tilles played some waltzlike ostinatos on the piano. When the piano next reappeared, it was not real but sampled, yet lifelike and totally out of tune, as though something terrible had happened to it since the piece began. The illusion of deterioration was matched by rhythmic entropy as the ostinatos gradually fell apart, until near the end Tilles banged clusters with her palms, but smoothly, as though she were sculpting sound by hand. Gosfield's exquisitely contoured noise is a more subtle pleasure than randomness-loving Downtown often affords.

Beglarian, in her *FlamingO*, made the ensemble sound, at times, almost incidental. Christine Bard opened the work by twirling a wolf-chaser (also called a thunderstick or bull-roarer), a stick of wood on a string that Native Americans use to create a roaring noise.

From that whirring beginning the wolf-chaser expanded via sampler to overwhelm the acoustic players, who also had to compete with amplified flamingo chirps and metallic noises. The woodwinds repeated little syncopated melodies, the brass made reiterative honks, and Sonhando Estwick played a jazzy vibe solo as, underneath it all, the oversize thunderstick began to sound like a huge alien trying to tell us something. The piece's joyous energy ran on several levels at once, and it says something about the future relationship of orchestra and technology that Beglarian was able to make the acoustic instruments sound as though they emerged from her envelope of noise.

Admittedly, in such a context, Darius Milhaud's *La Création du monde*, with its "primitively" soloistic string quartet and wah-wahing J.D. Parran on alto sax, didn't sound much like an orchestra either. Neither did Olivier Messiaen's stark yet brilliantly colorful *Oiseaux exotiques*, which Grunin's crisp, energetic conducting brought across with superb rhythmic excitement, as Kathleen Supvoé dynamically pounded out birdsongs on the piano. I suppose the quest to de-orchestrate the orchestra is older than Downtown. ❖

Wanting the Moon

Grunin lets the composers he commissions choose the rest of the program from music that influenced them. Beglarian picked a figure still living, microtonalist Ben Johnston, whose jaunty but stunningly difficult Chamber Symphony demands that the orchestra play 12-tone rows in pure, just intonation tunings. Because of the way Johnston constructs his row, the piece didn't sound 12-tone; it just seemed to change key every few beats, in terraced polyphony and lively rhythmic ostinatos. Playing such rhythms in perfect tuning to an overtone and undertone series has defeated more-practiced orchestras than the Crosstown. Despairing of both perfect tuning and energy, Grunin opted for energy, which was the better choice. As Johnston told me, "I asked for the moon in that piece, and I get part of it."

I have to retract a comment in my *Voice Choice* about the "ill-paid" Crosstown performers: apparently they were respectably compensated for this performance. Nice to know. —K.G.

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