

Kathleen Supové and Lisa Cella Give Techno Composers Better Than They Deserve

RESIGNATING WITH THE AUDIENCE

BY KYLE GANN



KATHLEEN SUPOVÉ KNOWS HOW TO ROOT OUT INTERESTING COMPOSERS FROM THE UNDERGROUND.

Sometimes you walk out of a new music concert just aggrieved for the wasted potential. Pianist Kathleen Supové and flutist Lisa Cella are energetic, committed performers who laugh at technical difficulties, but only in the final minutes of their November 20 concert at NYU did the music rise to a level that justified their heroic efforts. And that was because Supové at least knows how to root out interesting composers from the underground. Cella played some of the Famous Names everyone's taught to revere in school these days, including two composers from IRCAM, the Institute for the Recycling of Crappy Atonal Music. At least, that's what I assume the acronym stands for, from the relentlessly ugly quality of the music I've heard belch forth from the place for 20 years.

And so Cella fought her way through *Superscriptio*, by that superman of postserial megacomplexity Brian Ferneyhough, a work (and I do mean work) for solo piccolo that looked like it must have cost tremendous effort to learn, with its million subtleties of which at least 999,900 went for naught, as the piece was devoid of any audible throughline except for the absolute avoidance of any memorable moment. Two flute pieces with electronics by Finnish flavor-of-the-month Kaija Saariaho and IRCAM-er Cort Lippe (not a Famous Name yet, but a big Euro-prize winner) were more interesting, though as arbitrarily written, and with that peculiar academic delusion that the occasional intense repetition of one note will elicit a delighted emotional response from the listener. Flute crescendos in Lippe's work elicited clangy and prickly IRCAM noises from the electronics, while Saariaho's similarly brought up whispering voices and flute tones.

Supové took the second half of the program, and in the first work she played you could hear more clearly what Lippe and Saariaho had been trying to accomplish. *Landmine*, by New Yorker Dafna Naphtali, likewise elicited noises from a pile of circuitry, but since the performer's input consisted of fast repeated notes on the piano and modal figures that crashed back again and again like waves, it actually seemed as though the performer was

gradually bringing the electronic noises to life. Echoes and backward tones grew more prominent the more violently Supové played, and at the end extra notes began to spew from the keyboard itself, which turned out to be MIDI-controlled. I wished the piece hadn't gone on for so long, but you did get the point. After so much chaos we were hungry for a moment of simplicity, and it came with Nick Didkovsky's *Rama Broom*. Here Supové played a repeated drone note low in the bass, and over it slowly built up a texture, first of overtones and later of bluesier, more dissonant notes. As pitches accumulated, she began to speak words into a microphone: "up," "dread," "dwarfed," "stick," that finally coalesced into one of the permuted nonsense sentences Didkovsky loves to play with, "Ran a broomstick for undread times up" (I think). His rock-jazz-classical fusion ensemble music uses such playful algorithms to achieve a wild rhythmic energy, and it wasn't quite as clear what he was driving at in this gentler context.

The real breath of fresh air waited until the very end, in Randall Woolf's *Adrenalin Revival*. This was a series of vignettes, filled with rock-tinged melodies and ostinatos mostly in high or low registers, in which the electronics added little more than a halo of resonance (or "resignance," to use George W. Bush's newspeak). Finally, for the first time in this concert, a composer stepped out from behind his systems and circuitry, wrote some tunes, made some vulnerable compositional choices right out in public for no better reasons than that he liked them, and was more interested in communicating something he felt than in impressing us. It seems so simple when you finally see someone do it, and then you wonder why all composers don't do it, why so many composers spend all their time impressing each other, why they actually seem to believe that there not only is no difference, but *should* be no difference, between a concert and an academic conference. And when someone does do it, like the ideas George W. has been searching for, it resignates with the audience, makes you feel like you've interacted with another human being, and renders the hard work of good musicians like Supové and Cella all worthwhile. ▣

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