

Rousing Euro-Rabble

By Kyle Gann

Brooklyn Philharmonic

Focus!

Europe is waking from more than a decade of unprecedented musical stagnation. The mandates of the '50s Darmstadt crowd—Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Kagel, Nono—have proved so overpowering that their students follow sheeplike in their tracks, and no independent personalities emerge. At least that's how it looks from here; I suspect that, in Europe as in America, it's the good little brown-nosing boys (never girls) whose music gets distributed. But Joel Sachs (of the Continuum Institute) curated the Juilliard School's "Focus!" festival of new European music, and I trusted his ecumenical taste to reveal a truer picture. The night I attended, he didn't disappoint. The composers from Europe's periphery seem freer from the Darmstadt thumb than the French or Germans, so I showed up January 29 for music from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece.

Though most of the composers were younger than I am (37), four of the nine pieces could have been written when I was a toddler. David del Puerto's *Verso I* for flute, for example, was the usual, '60s-style, serialist hailstorm, flecked with obligatory fluttertongues, trills, and notes sticking out of register as though the music had been first sketched on graph paper. But a small minority of post-

minimal and postpostminimal works were more original. Ludovico Einaudi (Italy) has written some fairly mindless pattern pieces, but his Octet at this concert echoed incisive motives between piano and marimba in a tight, unusually textured structure. *Visions of the Night* by Calliope Tsoupaki (Greek, and female to boot) crescendoed chords over evolving ostinatos, and, since a triangle hung from every music stand, *pings* danced around the 13-member ensemble like fireflies at dusk.

The most interesting foreigners have one eye on the Americans, but disdain to follow us too closely. Pianist Helene Jeanney played *Perduto in una città d'acqua* by Salvatore Sciarrino, the most famous post-Berio Italian. The piece brooded over simple octaves and slow, tonal melodies before bursting into chromatic flurries. A piano sonata by Spain's Jesus Rueda (James Giles performing) was about the best remolo piece I'd heard—a new and growing genre—but its ecstatic shimmerings flared closer to Scriabin's *Vers la Flamme* than anything New World. Lorenzo Ferrero, though, knew his audience, and brought cheers with his *Ostinato*, a playful, syncopated rock piece for six cellos. The Juilliard students who performed brought élan to the 12-tone repertoire, but in the postminimal music, which exposed them more, they were shaky; schools haven't yet learned that music after the 12-tone era

requires its own technique. Every new generation gets to repeat Schoenberg's disclaimer: "My music isn't modern, it's only badly played."

Ferrero, a rabble-rouser after my own heart, mentioned in his notes that most Italian composers still imitate Luciano Berio. Yet Berio himself is not so much a great composer as the century's most brilliant (re)arranger of other people's music. His best works creep like ivy around preexisting material: *Sinfonia* (its third movement growing from the Scherzo of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*), *Folk Songs* (deliciously ornate folk tune settings), and *Voci* (written around Sicilian street calls and lullabies). Everything Berio transforms becomes gold. But when he doesn't have a melodic core to start with, his music sparkles with exquisite technique, but rarely reaches the underlying contrapuntal depth of Boulez, Stockhausen, or even his countrymen Nono and Maderna.

One of Berio's most astonishing feats, revealed at BAM January 29 and 30 by Dennis Russell Davies and the Brooklyn Philharmonic, has been to take the sketches of Franz Schubert's unfinished Tenth Symphony and embed them in his own mystical textures, the result titled *Rendering for Orchestra*. Schubert's fluid phrasing and immediate, evocative key changes marked a startling departure from his earlier symphonies, a development cut tragically short. A second movement



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danced a typical *ländler* tune, while the third turned a hunting-horn theme into an un-Schubertian fugue. With uncommon good taste, Berio declined to fill in the gaps with any imitation of Schubert's style, but rather allowed the sketches to emerge from an impressionist fog of quotations, string cluster chords, and a filigree of tinkling celesta. It was a second, milder *Sinfonia* with Schubert as subject rather than Mahler, a gorgeous blending of two lyrical but distinct sensibilities.

Rendering was preceded by Berio's *Concerto II (Echoing Curves)*, with piano soloist Andrea Lucchesini bringing motives out of massive sonorities with fantastic clarity. This was a stunning piece of compositional virtuosity, pitches crystallizing as points of tension, texture after texture springing forth in incredible profusion. Before the last arpeggio rippled, though, the very variety became tiring, and as with so much Berio, the piece never seemed to grasp a truth more profound than

technical.

After the concert, Davies conducted an audience-talk with Berio, who came off like a threatened old revolutionary-turned-conservative. He's joined a trans-European think tank, he said, for "the defense of cultural values," and added, possibly with non-Berio-imitating composers like Ferrero in mind, "We must fear the future." But, like academic culture-defenders on this side of the Atlantic, Signore Berio confuses *his* world with *the* world. The end of serialism is not the end of great music, any more than the end of Schubert's Romanticism was. It's Oedipal psychology: If the serialists don't get to pass their craft down to their children, it's because they wouldn't let their children grow up to be independent, and the bold ones had to rebel to escape. Our generation has its own plans for a new world, Luciano, and we expect to prefer it over the often beautiful, but crazy, dictatorial, and antagonistic one your generation left us. ■

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