

## The Asia Society/ Black American Composers

# Sho Tunes

BY KYLE GANN

Sometimes I think that contemporary music is a virus that afflicts primarily white Euramerican men, especially those with post-graduate degrees; that serialists are in the final stages of the disease, while composers of minimalist and ambient music are frantically ransacking ethnic worldviews for a cure. If so, it is a disease to which artists from other cultures are often heartbreakingly vulnerable.

I got that queasy feeling from two February 21 concerts, especially one, at the Asia Society, of contemporary music written for the Japanese mouth organ, the *sho*. The sho player, young Mayumi Miyata, remarkable in every respect, enchanted the audience with the beauty of the delicate instrument. The tunes she played, though, all by Japanese composers, were full of Westernisms that would have been innocuous in other contexts, but here seemed a violation of an instrument that had hitherto escaped the omnivorous avant-garde.

Perhaps Miyata shouldn't have begun with a selection of traditional gagaku, Japan's ancient royal court music, an impossible act to follow. Reverently motionless, she exhaled a shimmering continuum of consonance, crescendo after crescendo without a break; the music would sustain for a brief eternity, then surge into melody, repeatedly reaching upward and drawing the soul of the lis-

tener with it. Performed on a half-darkened stage, it was as religious an experience as anyone present needed that Saturday afternoon.

The spell was broken by Toshi Ichiyangi's 1983 sho solo, *Hoshi No Wa*. Best among the evening's composers, Ichiyangi is famous for his Cage-influenced, radically aleatoric music, and I was skeptical as to how his raucous approach would work in so gentle a context. It didn't. Dotted with obligatory silences, *Hoshi* moved from dissonance to consonance to single lines in a growth process that seemed all too predictable next to gagaku's intuitive illogic.

Cort Lippe's *Music for Sho and Harp* (Susan Jolles playing the latter) was far more effective, contrasting clusters and extended techniques for both instruments (including overblowing and humming for the sho, and mallet-striking for the harp) in a disjointed polyphony. But there's something jarring, even for Western ears, about hearing an instrument associated with folk or religious rituals subjected to the relatively trivial indignities of the avant-garde. We think of a musical instrument as a functionally shaped lump of wood, metal, and plastic, but Eastern instruments still carry the aura of their spiritual use. Maybe it's my unfair bias, but the buzzing of the sho

## MUSIC

seems so much more embodied, so much less abstract than our instruments, that seeing it abused like George Crumb's piano was like finding a "primitive" Borneo tribe drinking Pepsi and wearing T-shirts. Only Kimi Sato, in her *Suisho Ingetsu* ("Crystal Moon"), paid homage to the traditional sho style, elaborating its swelling modal phrases with some fetching tremolos and chord repetitions.

The nadir was reached with Makoto Moroi's *Contradiction III (Landscape With Cloud)*, a naive attempt at music



Shoist Mayumi Miyata

theater that degenerated into slapstick. As the program notes had it, the oboe, English horn, and bassoon symbolized human beings, the percussion nature, and the sho "the Heavenly Voice." In reality, the randomly angular woodwind lines and the cartoonlike cacophony of the percussion symbolized too much training in the platitudes of academia. But Moroi had one good intuition when he dubbed the sho the "Heavenly Voice," for even in this debased setting Miyata's ethereal playing was mermerizing. Given a more thoughtful repertoire, she could have held me rapt for hours.

The other February 21 program was a community concert of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, enthusiastically led by Tania Leon. It seems anachronistic in 1987 to entitle a concert "Music by Black American Composers," unless perhaps intended to distinguish *real music* from jazz. But it is difficult to pretend that the rarity of excellent composers like Ulysses Kay and George Walker on orchestra programs

doesn't have something to do with not just their race, but with what circles they're likely to move in. Classical programming has so much to do with whether you're black or white, gay or straight, Princeton or Cal Arts—and so little to do with talent.

It has a lot to do with money, too, the lack of which apparently dictated the music on this well-intended program. Everything seemed chosen with an eye for minimal rehearsal requirements. Certainly Kevin Scott's Scherzo for String Orchestra, a wistful piece in Dvorak's train-ride genre, and Leslie Adams's Ravel-ish "Valse" from his *Dunbar Songs*, didn't present the Philharmonic with anything it hadn't played before. *The Masque of Saxophone's Voice* by Carman Moore was a delightful children's piece, in a mildly dissonant but inviting idiom, about a saxophone who learns to play low notes and the cello who falls in love with her: a lesson in tolerance and a worthy companion to *Peter and the Wolf*.

Most intriguing was a piece with puppets, *First Song of Cold Mountain* by Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson. Inspired by the Chinese poet Han Shan, who extolled rural life, it contrasted the rhythmical city music of flute and drums with the pointillist, irrational nature music of three guitars. Like Moroi's, the idea was naively illustrative, but the resulting heterophony was very attractive; the guitars' isolated notes echoed the flute in pitch, though not in rhythm. Enigmatically, the piece owed its charm to the mellow, African-influenced city music—doubtless not what Han Shan had in mind.

That W. A. Mozart was black will come as a shock to many musicologists, but the inclusion of his Piano Concerto, K. 246, on this program afforded evidence that this was indeed the case. Mozart's youthful fame speaks well for racial conditions in 18th century Vienna. Seriously, though, it's a shame that this brief program wasn't filled out with music by black composers. ■

**J&R MUSIC  
WORLD**

**NEW YORK SYMPHONIC ENSEMBLE**  
MAMORU TAKAHARA, CONDUCTOR  
MARCH 15, 1987 at 8PM

**DANCE**