Rebecca La Brecque/Iannis Xenakis

A Show of Hands

BY KYLE GANN

Composer Morton Feldman once had a standing challenge to his students to see who could come up with the worst orchestration. No one ever won, since the challenge was designed to backfire: the more each student tried to invent an improbable combination of instruments, the more interesting his or her work became.

Something about Rebecca La Brecque's challenge to seven composers brings that story to mind. La Brecque mustn't be confused with the Labèque sisters; they're two pianists who play identical keyboards, whereas La Brecque is one pianist who plays two different keyboards. La Brecque commissioned seven composers to each write a piece for piano and DX7 digital synthesizer to be simultaneously played by one person. Like Feldman's, the challenge seemed so determined to produce bad works that it was bound to prod the composers into a higher level of inspiration.

If La Brecque's scheme was only partially successful, it produced thought-provoking results. By commissioning seven such works, she created with one stroke a repertoire, saving each one from curio status and likely oblivion. Similarly, the passionate drama of La Brecque's playing raised her above the level of novelty. Every piece during her November 16 Merkin Hall concert was given a fiery, committed reading, filled with most conceivable emotions save dry objectivity. The facility—indeed, the grace with which she swept and swiveled between her keyboards, each demanding its own technical nuances, made for an astonishingly virtuosic performance.

The piano-DX7 setup has inherent problems. The trite solution is to continually alternate the two instruments, and most of the pieces (Gregory Reeve's otherwise intriguing *Orchives*, for example) fell into that trap intermittently. Smoothed over by La Brecque's tremendous stage presence, the technique worked as a theatrical gesture, but close your eyes and it began to sound a little silly, like a duo between players who constantly defer to each other. The obvious effective solution is this: La Brecque has two hands and two keyboards; divide them evenly. Only David Gottlieb's *(re:) location and relocation* used that ploy to any extent, combining piano melodies with a buzzy digital timbre in a way that they indistinguishably merged. The piece was at its best when it succumbed to a naïve fascination with weird sounds, such as the repeated piano notes underlaid with sweeping electronic noises that recalled futurism's factory-evocations.

William Kraft's *Requiescat* (the concert's only nonpremiere) and Conrad Pope's *Jeux-Partis* both used the DX7's sustaining capacity to make droning, textural accompaniments. The latter, full of violent chords and sporadic flurries of faster notes, was not inventive enough to justify its considerable length. Kraft's piece was dramatically well-shaped, but its juxtaposition of serialist gestures with ostinati weakened its syntactical coherence. David Froom took the intelligent, cautious route in his Second Ballade, using the DX7 to mildly enhance the piano's thick harmonies and impressionistic figurations.

Perhaps the most memorable pieces were by Dean Friedman and Robert Pace, and for different reasons. Friedman's *Daphnia*, "the story of a humble waterflea who evolves into an armour-throwing helicopter," controlled the DX7 via computer, slightly begging La Brecque's question by answering it with a conventional piano-and-tape format. But his spry, delicate filigree, growing to an insectually enormous climax, had not only textural interest but the evening's only real humor. The most inventive approaches by far were found in Pace's *Night Fantasy*, though its profusion of techniques vitiated its internal coherence. Pace was the sole composer to resort to a digital delay for the DX7, and its decrescendoing repetitions under the piano patterns were enchanting.


MICHAEL BELENKY

La Brecque

The evening's larger disappointment, though, was the utter homogeneity of the middle-of-the-road, early-Elliott Carter-ish atonalism of all seven pieces, the undistinctive lingua franca of the East Coast academy for more than 20 years. One can imagine what a master of multiple-keyboard performance such as Terry Riley might have conceived for this unusual instrumentation, and the thought leads to disappointment that more elegant solutions weren't found. Had Rebecca La Brecque put as much variety into her choice of composers as into her playing, the music itself might have emerged as memorable as her performances.

Over the same weekend, Australian pianist Roger Woodward took a similarly fierce and more single-minded approach to another world premiere, that of Iannis Xenakis's *Keqrops* with the New York Philharmonic. This is one of Xenakis's most powerful and extroverted scores—otherwise one can hardly imagine Zubin Mehta conducting it—but its power seemed achieved at a disturbing price. Contrary to common belief, there's nothing random about Xenakis's music; his stochastic processes are carefully set up to ensure that no internal details draw attention away from his overall sound masses. *Keqrops*, though, contained elements that threatened its own quantitative balance: parallel chords in the brass (from a composer who has always avoided the issue of harmony!) and an honest-to-God melody in the piano solo. The intrusion of such qualitative elements made, for this listener, conflicting demands on the attention.

Part of the problem may have resided in the uneven execution. Through whatever blend of orchestration, conducting, and acoustics, the piano rarely sounded like more than background, despite heroic efforts by Woodward. Certain complex sections, notably one passage of string glissandi, sounded not only uncharacteristically random but distinctly faked. Whether *Keqrops* represents an impressive and consistent addition to Xenakis's oeuvre or a crisis in his intellectual development will have to await further and better performances for confirmation. ■