

# Sweet Dreams

California E.A.R. Unit  
Weill Recital Hall  
March 18

BY KYLE GANN

about to change. His *Dreamtime*, a massive chamber work (the oxymoron fits), appeared here in concert and on CD (Cambria) simultaneously, both played by the impressive and Downtown-identified California E.A.R. Unit. In 19 movements spread across 80 minutes, ably conducted by composer Rand Steiger, the piece ranged kaleidoscopically in strategy and technique, evoking the dream world sometimes through vague, filmy textures, other times through the illogic of its sudden contrasts. Coincident timing of the CD was a smart move; a first listening failed to draw me in, the performance struck me intermittently with its beauty, and subsequent hearings are quickly endearing the entire piece to me.

What remains intransigently European in Baley's music is the virtuosically soloistic ensemble style. What felt like an accommodation to American new-music fans were the memorable sonic images, which emerged less often as recognizable themes (though there were a couple of those, too) than as translucent textures. Complex contra-



RAHAV SEGEV

The E.A.R. Unit: a comfortable earthiness

puntal passages veered sometimes toward Carterian opacity, more often toward the lucid rhythmic fabric of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. And embedded like jewels within these Euro-complexities were movements and moments worth taking home: the gently rocking dissonances of "Tears," the bittersweet chorale with scurrying vibraphone and wrong-note violin

melody of "In the Labyrinth." A really astonishing passage was movement 10, "Parastas," in which Dorothy Stone's Ukrainian chant-quoting flute glided above the twangy murmuring of two Jew's harps (boinged by violinist Robin Lorentz and clarinetist James Rohrig).

Aesthetic positions on the West Coast being somewhat less adversarial than here, the E.A.R. Unit is catholic in its repertoire, ranging from Stockhausen to Morton Subotnick's spirited *The Key to Songs* to Arthur Jarvinen's music with spray cans. Yet the very presence in the ensemble of two percussionists (Jarvinen and Amy Knoles) steers the group away from the academic *Pierrot*

*Lunaire* sound and toward a Downtown edge. And so while *Dreamtime* often aimed at European abstraction, it did so from ensemble and sonic premises that kept pulling it back to a comfortable earthiness. Good thing: in a work with so many mountains to climb and lakes to wade through, it helped that you could frequently stand in place and savor the fresh air. ♦

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The European-born and -trained composer who opts to make his or her career in America is in an odd position. In the past, such artists generally blended into the wallpaper of the classical establishment, mystified but not troubled by the literalism and systematic tendencies of their native-born colleagues. Today, with that establishment losing steam and besieged by popular music and multiculturalism, such an option no longer seems so attractive. Elliott Carter may still resent "the tyranny of the audience," but even Europeans are beginning to see the necessity of appealing to general listeners as not a bad thing, as a way of keeping a social conscience in one's work. And so we have at least two important mid-career Europeans—Ukrainian-born Virko Baley (former conductor of the Nevada Symphony) and Czech-born Petr Kotik (conductor of the S.E.M. Ensemble)—whose music illustrates the conflicting demands of European technique and American populism.

Kotik's elegant solution has been to write music of highly nuanced, expert counterpoint, but within the flat, non-hierarchical surface of Cagean aesthetics. Baley's solutions are less well known in New York, but that seems

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