Tania Leon / Borah Bergman

The Yoruban Moon

BY KYLE GANN

One Apollo astronaut announced his arrival on the moon with the black English phrase "We is here," which inspired a poem by Betty Neill, which in turn led to a compelling collage-madrigal by Tania Leon. Leon, a Cuban-born Brooklynite, is better known as conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic's Community-Family concerts than as a composer. But unlike that of so many conductors, her writing is hardly secondary, as became clear at the Alternative Museum's February 22 presentation of three of her works. If *De-Orishas*, the madrigal—no other term will convey its fluid, a cappella, six-part countrapuntal idiom—was unsettling in its confluence of texts and genres, it was also the program's most fascinating offering, made memorable in an energetic performance by the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble.

De-Orishas was assembled from odd parts. The first is a poem called "Ache Iroko," written in Yoruban, the language of a people in Nigeria. Leon has no translation of the poem, but she set it as an homage to her Yoruban grandmother. The second, called "The Amossary" after

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Betty Neill's poem, revolves around the words "We is here," and the third is simply a collection of syllables and consonantal noises assembled for their sonic value and titled "Bambula." Crazy as the premise was, Leon fused those texts smoothly, beginning in slow, sustained notes, moving through passages in gospel style, with laughter and whispering, joyful echoings of "We is here!" and forests of consonants. The vocal effects were so well-grounded in a vigorous choral/gospel style that they had none of the incongruity they used to in the '60s' more abstract, Stockhausenish vocal barrages, and when *De-Orishas* was done, you felt as though you had definitely gone a few places and come back.

Next to this, Leon's solo instrumental pieces could hardly have been as distinctive. Pianist Joanne Polk played *Ritual*, consisting of a slow introduction graced by dotted rhythms, then a denser toccata of accented, staccato dissonances—a form reminiscent of 1940s neobaroque modernism, but still effective. Three Pieces for Cello made less of an impression, though they were given weight by their tendency to use open strings as a kind of intermittent drone, and Madeleine Shapiro attacked them with dramatic resonance. A trio of works so disparate in medium wasn't enough to draw an overall picture of Leon's sensibility, but it was sufficient to make one look forward to more.

Shapiro was preceded by pianist Borah Bergman in four dense improvisations. One had to admire the energy with which Bergman attacked the piano for over an hour, and the control with which he fashioned a consistent style from only a few ideas. Three pieces with long titles—*Dialectics, Dialogues, and the Double Idea*, "Juxtapositions and Absurdities" from *The First Piano Opera*, and the newest, *Upside Down Visions*—started from small, clearly audible motives and returned to them after tortuous developments. A fourth, *The Destruction and Rebirth of "Spirit Song,"* interrupted a mellow jazz tune with jarring forearm clusters.

Over the hour, though, Bergman's consistency became a liability. His recipe for formal contrast had only two ingredients:

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Leon takes you places.

texture A is frenetic, texture B slow and tense, then alternate A and B until the audience has the pattern memorized. And his harmonies were infected with "major seventh disease": every motive was honed with dissonant intervals, and in developments he banged minor ninths and slapped hectically at small clusters. There are theories behind the therapeutic value of listening to consonant frequency ratios for sustained periods, but I couldn't tell what pleasure this unvaried clash was intended to provide. After 45 minutes, the *"Spirit Song,"* cadencing gracefully onto a sharped tonic, came as a tremendous relief, the kind you get when you stop hitting your forehead with a hammer.

Bergman's description of his intentions confuses things. His technique rests on, he says, "the principle of ambidexterity—the left hand being developed to be the equal of the right hand in terms of strength and dexterity." Now I had a few piano lessons once—admittedly, my Beethoven's Opus 90 left one teacher in tears—and I was given to understand that the idea of equal hand dexterity was somewhat older than the story about Washington and the cherry tree. If a pianist's sinister was *less* developed than his dexter, I'd feel obliged to make unpleasant note of the fact. I expected that perhaps Bergman was going to mirror his right hand gestures with his left, but such symmetry was rarer than it is in the music of Bartok. So I'm left unsure, by his playing and even more by his notes, just what it is Bergman's tireless efforts are meant to accomplish.

I'm even more unsure as to what the NEA thinks it's accomplishing in cutting off the Alternative Museum's funding for their 1989-90 season, on ostensive charges that their audiences haven't grown sufficiently and that their programming is "self-serving." The Alternative Museum's new music series, probably the best-attended south of 57th Street, is also the most conscientious in New York in including artists of all possible ethnic origins and genders without sacrificing quality. This decision is as ludicrous as last year's denial of funds to Relache, since reversed in embarrassment, on grounds that they don't perform a wide enough variety of composers (no other mixed ensemble in America plays so wide a range). Signs are that the NEA's long-held anti-new music bias is becoming arrogantly overt, and this column will be watching. ■

Concerts