

Sonor Borealis

Curt Veeneman, Director

Saturday, at 8:00 pm
20 January 1990

Convocation Hall, Arts Building,
University of Alberta

Programme

- Take That (1972)** William Albright
(for four drummers with 16 drums) (b. 1944)
Rajat Nigam, percussion
Trevor Brandenburg, percussion
Trevor Bigam, percussion
Scott Martin, percussion
- Cucumber Music (1969)** Donald Martin Jenni
(“Metamorphosis” for 4 Players - 9 Instruments) (b. 1937)
Bill Damur, alto flute/piccolo
Michael Bowie, viola/toy piano
Curt Veeneman, celeste/piano
Scott Martin, vibraphone, glockenspiel, tam-tams
- Ballade (1978)** Jacques Hétu
(b. 1938)
Roger Admiral, piano
- The Wonderful Widow of
Eighteen Springs (1942)** John Cage
(b. 1912)
Debra Ollikkala, voice
Curt Veeneman, piano
- River (Ordeal by Water) (1983)** Curt Veeneman
(b. 1953)
4 channel electronic tape
- Vier Stücke für Klarinette
und Klavier, op. 5 (1913)** Alban Berg
(1885-1935)
Wendy Crispin, clarinet
Roger Admiral, piano
- Isn't This A Time (1981)** Christian Wolff
(b. 1934)
Rosemarie Siever, Michael Spindloe, soprano saxophones
Jennifer Beare, Darcy Kolada, alto saxophones
Scott Lebsack, Charles Stolte, alto saxophones
Shannon Bolichowski, Dana Parkson, tenor saxophones
Dan Baker, James Lerner, baritone saxophones

PROGRAM NOTES:

Take That

William Albright

William Albright is an American composer, pianist and organist. He attended the Juilliard Preparatory Department, the University of Michigan (where he now teaches), and the Paris Conservatoire where he studied with Olivier Messiaen. He has won many awards including two Koussevitsky Composition Awards, Fullbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, the Queen Marie-José Prize, and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1979 he was composer-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome. He has been instrumental in reviving interest in ragtime music through his piano performance as well as through some of his compositions, most notably, *Grand Sonata in Rag*.

Take That is a truly visceral experience. Four drummers surround the audience and what ensues is a spatially conceived sonic boom (Drummers 1 and 2 play five drums each, and 3 and 4 each play three drums). The work opens with a chain of steady-state impulses which are spasmodically disturbed by intense syncopes. After several new bursts of energy wane in turn, the music settles into a rapid play of sound gestures which are passed around the auditorium in complex cross-rhythms and alternating meters. After a tour through a graphically-notated section marked "senza misura," periodicity returns, stronger (and faster) than ever. During this climax of the work, with its subtle cross-references of dynamic levels and articulation, it may sometimes seem to a listener in the middle of the auditorium that he or she is in motion, rather than the sound which surrounds.

Cucumber Music

Donald Martin Jenni

Donald Martin Jenni is the Director of the Composition and Theory Department at the University of Iowa. He received his Ph.D. in composition from Stanford University and an A.M. in medieval studies from the University of Chicago. He has composed many works ranging from opera to a work for solo glockenspiel. He was a Ford Foundation composer-in-residence in 1960-61 in Ann Arbor, and has held residence fellowships at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. In 1981 Jenni received the National Endowment for the Arts Composer Award. A speaker of 12 languages, he teaches Latin when he is not in the music department, and has recently published a metrical study of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*.

Jenni writes of *Cucumber Music*: "A significant attraction at Iowa when I arrived there in 1968 was its vital and exciting professional Center for New Music. Since the "mission" of the Center extends to bringing new music to the hinterlands, it occurred to me that my next work for them ought to be a 'travelling piece,' small in its numbers, easily transported and interesting for its performers. That work is *Cucumber Music*, which was completed in November of 1969.

Cucumber Music continued

"Although it once ingratiated the work with a rural Iowa audience, the title has no symbolic significance, but was a partly humorous, partly affectionate working title which 'stuck.' Actually, a second title emerges as the work's dedication -- at the inception of eleven plucked A-flats in the piano. This is: Monumentulum pro V. ('a little monument for V(ictoria)'), whose death on November 5 of that year transformed my notions of the work in progress and is commemorated through the ancient technique of *soggetto cavato*.

"The work may be heard as the gradual process of transformation from highly active -- and yet essentially static -- blocks of isorhythmic events to expansive trajectories of single pitches, and from relative independence among the players to the most intimate levels of mutual shaping characteristic of chamber music, through the catalyst of a central (heterophonic) encounter."

Ballade

Jacques Hétu

Jacques Hétu is the Director of the Department of Music at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He studied at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal and the Ecole normale supérieure de musique in Paris; his teachers include Claude Pepin, Lucas Foss, Henri Dutilleux and Olivier Messiaen. He has written over 40 works, including three symphonies, five concertos, and several works for voice and orchestra.

Ballade is in some ways reminiscent of the pianism of the nineteenth century: lyrical, long lines underpinned by Chopinesque arpeggios and interspersed with virtuosic, chromatic passages. Yet, its materials reveal an early twentieth century predisposition for cellular construction, quartal harmony alternating with tertial, and motivic saturation. The opening cell is announced in quadruple octaves; it then germinates into a variety of forms in the remainder of the piece. It is the evolution of the character of this piece that propels it -- now it is restrained, then agitated, then angry, then calm. At the work's end, the solitude of an octave with an open fifth dissolves out of a dense cluster.

The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs **John Cage**

Perhaps no other American composer has had a greater impact on twentieth century music than John Cage. Born in 1912 in Los Angeles, he studied with Lazare Lévy in Paris, with Adolph Weiss in Los Angeles, Henry Cowell in New York and Arnold Schönberg in Los Angeles. He furthered Cowell's piano techniques and went on to develop the "prepared piano," in which objects such as bolts or rubber bands are inserted between the strings in order to produce a variety of timbres. He also explored chance in composition as well as performance, being the first to use graphic notation. In the 1950s, Cage prefigured performance art in staging various "events," and was also one of the early experimenters with electronic music.

The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs continued

In addition to being a composer, he is a performer, an author of several books, and a lecturer. His awards are too numerous to mention.

"For the Singer: The words of this song are adapted from page 556 of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Sing without vibrato, as in folk-singing. Make any transposition necessary in order to employ a low and comfortable range. For the Pianist: Close a grand piano completely (strings and keyboard)."

This is how the performers are instructed in the score to *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs*. Cage goes on to explain to the pianist his system of notating the percussive treatment of the piano -- the manner in which it is struck (with fingers or knuckles), and where (in one of four places). While the pianist produces sound patterns of great complexity, the singer intones on three pitches which seem continually to generate myriad relationships within the line's rhythmic framework. The composer states that no rhythmic structure or method was consciously employed -- all the elements followed from impressions received from the text.

Joyce's text treats English as a composite language, with which parts of words of other languages are combined:

Night by silentsailing night isobel wiidwood's eyes and primarose hair, quietly, all the woods so wild, in mauves of moss and daphnedews, how all so still she lay, neath of the whitethorn, child of tree, like some losthappy leaf, like blowing flower stilled, as fain would she anon, for soon again 'twill be, win me, woo me, wed me, ah weary me! deeply, now even calm lay sleeping; Night, Isobel, sister Isobel, Saintette Isabelle, Madame Isa Veuve La Belle.

River (Ordeal by Water)

Curt Veeneman

Curt Veeneman is a visiting assistant professor in music theory and composition at the University of Alberta. He received his Ph.D. in composition from the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied with Andrew Imbrie. He has composed over 25 works in diverse media, including many solo works, a string quartet and various other chamber works, some song cycles, two symphonies, and several electronic works employing both analogue and digital synthesis. He is the winner of several awards, including the ASCAP-Hubbell award and the Nicola DeLorenzo Prize in composition. This past summer several of his works were performed at the Montanea Festival - International Composers' Conference in Leukerbad, Switzerland, where he gave a workshop. In November, he was in New York to attend the east coast premiere of his electronic piece, *River (Ordeal by Water)*, which is presented on this first *Sonor Borealis* concert.

River (Ordeal by Water) has two ingredients: 7 water goblets of various sizes, 1 female voice

River (Ordeal by Water) continued

This unlikely brew was processed and mixed over a period of several months before reaching its final form on 4 channel tape. To begin, the goblets were partially filled with water to determine decidedly untempered pitch as well as timbre. I then "performed" on them in several ways: I rubbed the rims (in long or short strokes) with moistened finger, struck the globes with various objects, including fingertip, fingernail, wooden stick, plastic rod, metal rod, and pencil eraser, and also played on the stems and feet of the goblets in a similar manner. These sounds were, in turn, "filtered" by adjusting the cupped palm of my hand over the opening of the globe.

My wife, Colleen, contributed her voice. She projected either directly into a microphone, or indirectly, after allowing the vocalized sound to resonate in a large goblet. I next electronically processed each of these concrete sources. The resultant "river" of sound, with its range of pitch, tone color, articulation, and density being far greater than I had originally imagined, became my body of compositional materials.

The title of this work may serve as metaphor on several levels. There is the obvious progression, when the title is taken with the instrumentation, of river/water/goblet/mouth. But beyond this, on a formal level, a river is suggested by a cresting wave shape which is present in local rhythmic construction as well as in the large scale single arch of the work. And on a processive level, the "scenery" of the music changes gradually -- as would be the case on an actual river excursion -- giving a sense of greater magnitude to the work's organization of time.

But, there are dramatic contextual shifts. At one bend in the sonic river, the current suddenly begins to move much more swiftly, quickening the rate of change on the surface of the music. This transition is reflected in the degree of electronic manipulation of sound, as well as in the rate of accretion in texture. At a later point, the flow broadens, as if emptying into a great, perhaps celestial, body of water. It is here that a confluence of all elements is effected and a purity and transcendent simplicity prevails. Now even time evaporates with an eerie sonority: a reminiscence of an interrupted plagal cadence.

Vier Stücke für Klarinette und Klavier, op. 5 Alban Berg

Alban Berg had no formal compositional training until he met Arnold Schönberg, with whom he studied for six years. Together, teacher and student and another student, Anton Webern, initiated what came to be known as the New Viennese School of composition. Berg's international fame came with *Wozzeck*, his first opera. His works also include several chamber pieces, of which the *Lyric Suite* is perhaps best known, the *Violin Concerto*, and his second, incomplete opera, *Lulu*. His personal language developed, as did Schönberg's, out of the late romantic tradition and his evolution through atonal expressionism into serialism roughly parallels that of his teacher's.

Vier Stücke für Klarinette und Klavier, op. 5 continued

While both composers expressed their musical thought through intricate contrapuntal structures, Berg showed a penchant for deriving his materials from interval cycles on the one hand, while incorporating tonal elements into his serial method on the other. His music is at once highly complex and immediately accessible. In fact, the composer regarded emotive impact as central to music's purpose, as he acknowledged his "realization that sensuality is not a weakness, does not mean a surrender to one's own will. Rather it is an immense strength that lies in us -- the pivot of all being and thinking."

In the Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano we enter a musical world in miniature (the pieces are 12, 9, 18, and 20 measures long, respectively). Every gesture in these pieces is refined, delicate, and condensed. Instead of themes or motives, minute cells are encountered which continually revolve and reorder themselves into ever changing nuances. Chords and progressions are symmetrically disposed while the two instruments integrally relate to one another in a language rich in chromatic inflection. Berg exploits the full range of pitch, dynamics, and modes of articulation in the clarinet and writes sensitively for the piano. In his time, the exotic sound of fluttertongue on the clarinet, or the humming sympathetic resonance of the piano's strings (when keys are silently depressed), were new to most ears. Today the pieces still sound fresh and vital.

Isn't This A Time

Christian Wolff

Born in Nice, France, Christian Wolff moved to the United States in 1941 where he began his association with John Cage, David Tudor, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown in the 1950s. Between 1963 and 1970 he taught in the Classics Department at Harvard, and since 1971 he has been teaching Classics and Music at Dartmouth University in New Hampshire. He has written several pieces for piano, chamber groups, magnetic tape, unspecified groups of players and sound sources ("prose compositions"), orchestra, and chorus. As is the case with Cage, Wolff often allows a high degree of freedom for performers, leaving various parameters of his compositions up to the choice of the musicians who perform them.

"Isn't This A Time: solo for (any) saxophone or other reed instrument or several saxophones and (or) reed instruments."

This gives a clue to the indeterminate nature of many features of this work. Not only is the instrumentation relatively open to choice, but other aspects such as tempo, duration in certain places, articulation, dynamics, and phrasing are free. In fact, the work is specifically designed as to be fundamentally heterophonic when performed by more than one player, that is, all participants will not be in strict agreement. What actually occurs in this realm of possibilities is that the sound shape, predominantly made up of thirds, sevenths, and frequent reiterations, evolves through an echoic mass of arches, curves, and flourishes. Events fade and return in this domain of shifting phases, drawing the listener into a world of non-linearly conceived time.

NOTES:

Special thanks to John McCormick, Director of the Alberta College Percussion Ensemble and to Bill Street, Professor of Saxophone Performance and Director of the University Concert Band for their assistance in this concert.

Names of those who wish to be on our mailing list will automatically be entered in a drawing. The winner will receive a free compact disc (up to \$25 in value) from Edmonton's largest classical record store, The Gramophone.

Sonor Borealis is made up of faculty and students of the University of Alberta, in addition to members of the community. The purpose of Sonor Borealis is to bring vital new music to the northernmost major city in Canada. Our programming reflects two criteria: music which represents new directions (either current music which pushes boundaries in one way or another, or works which have cleared paths earlier in the century and have had an effect on subsequent composers) and music which represents a broad sweep of styles found in the world today.

Program notes by Curt Veeneman unless otherwise indicated.
