

Clever Marketing Hook, Mixed Musical Result

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NEW YORK – Contemporary music ensembles are plentiful in the Big Apple and, in order to survive financially, many performers belong to several groups. Given that overlap, and the fierce competition for dwindling resources, it is more important than ever to have a distinctive profile. American Modern Ensemble has positioned itself as one of the more convivial and stylistically catholic assemblages in town. Its programs have specific themes, with a curatorial aesthetic that stresses connections, often extra-musical, between pieces.

As a marketing strategy, the theme idea is a good one; AME's Merkin Hall concert on June 7, titled "Travelin' Music," drew a capacity crowd of listeners young and old. Chatting with attendees before the concert, a few of them told me that, while they usually didn't go to contemporary concerts, AME's approach made newer repertoire less forbidding. Among the group's ways of doing so, on this occasion, were an onstage discussion with composers, a raffle (prizes included an iPod shuffle and gift certificates), and an invitation to a post-concert chat and "reception" (which turned out to be another opportunity to make purchases from Merkin Hall's concession stand).

The repertoire also was not especially taxing: D.J. Sparr's sextet *Woodlawn Drive* (1999) took Americana elements reminiscent of Copland and moved them into a register about two octaves above where you'd expect to find them. The resulting fiddle tunes and ringing glockenspiel sounded like *Appalachian Spring* castoffs being played on a diminutive music box. Although Erik Friedlander is best known as an improvising cellist with a formidable background in jazz, he also has made some forays into notated works, among them *Block Ice and Propane* (2007), charming pieces filled with plucked notes and folk music flourishes here performed as excerpts by cellist Robert Burkhart.

In the vein of urban travel were two solo piano renditions of Billy Strayhorn's *Take the A-Train*. Toby Singer adopted a languidly rubato approach, while Blair McMillen rose to the challenge of reinventing an oft-heard tune by strumming the inside of the piano, muffling and scratching the strings to resemble track noise, and, with the assistance of an electronic bow, creating ringing sustained notes. McMillen's exertions suggested that Strayhorn for prepared piano could be a plausible subgenre worthy of further exploration.

AME's Artistic Director Robert Paterson was represented by two compositions, both laced with humorous touches. *Sextet* (1999) is filled with antic flurries of motion, police whistles, and scurrying gestures, bringing to mind a crime-caper film. Charles McCracken and McMillen offered a virtuosic reading of Paterson's Sonata for Bassoon and Piano, a polystylistic piece that starts with a neoclassical nod to Stravinsky, ends with a postmodern evocation of Rachmaninoff, and is filled with dizzying runs that traverse the bassoon's entire compass. Paterson captures the instrument's buffo characteristics but also makes it clear that, especially in the hands of a player like McCracken, this is an instrument to be taken seriously. Another impressive duet was violinist Nurit Pacht and McMillen's take on John Adams' *Road Movies*. Like Friedlander and Sparr, Adams draws upon vernacular influences, allowing Pacht a number of moments of country fiddling and jazzy inflections, balancing them with chugging ostinatos, often delivered at a breakneck pace.

If talking from the stage can help create a genial, informal atmosphere, the timing and the content have to be just right. Moments before the final work, Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (concerning trains in the 1940s, some of which transported Jewish prisoners to concentration camps in war-torn Europe), AME Managing Director and violinist Victoria Paterson took to the stage to thank the group's sponsors, announce upcoming events and funding initiatives, and offer a final chance to buy a raffle ticket.

Performed in the right atmosphere, *Different Trains*, for string quartet and tape, is one of Reich's finest, blending spoken-word recordings and overdubbed strings to create a host of attractive textures. It can be an intense, moving experience. But after Paterson's plugs, the requisite solemnity needed to engage both artists and audience had been dispelled. The performance also suffered from bad mixing and mic placement: treble frequencies were over-accentuated, page turns crackled over entrances.

AME is talented enough to take it to the next level, but first the group needs to trust its own artistry and let the

music do the talking.

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