

Concert Review - Day 3 of SCI Region IV 2003 Conference

By Nathan Wolek

The third and final day of concerts for the SCI Region IV conference started after a paper session with an afternoon concert featuring several works for interactive electronics and various forms of new media.

The concert began with the only completely acoustic work on the program, a woodwind quintet by Tayloe Harding called *Sacraments from Faith*. The two presented movements of this piece made wonderful use of timbre combinations available in both its rich chords and sometimes athletic arpeggiations. It was played confidently and carefully by Bläserquintet, the ensemble for whom it was commissioned.

Next we watched an animation by Tawatpong on DVD that featured a computer music score by James Croson. The expressionist visual style of the animation gave reference to the main character of the animation, an artist, with its bright colors and abstraction into basic shapes. The score provides the only sounds heard and therefore functions not only as music, but also as sound design to emphasize certain events in the animation's action. Croson's whimsical music provides the perfect accompaniment to the adventure that the artist finds himself on in this DVD.

Third, we heard a piece called *Wake* for string bass and interactive electronics by Mark Quanthamer. The electronics and bass worked in tandem for the majority of the piece, forming a work that was understated at times, exploring soft timbres often at the edge of perceptibility. Steven Landis performed the bass with great concentration while the composer monitored his carefully constructed software for producing the electronic accompaniment.

Next, James Paul Sain presented his work *Coriolis Effect* from a digital recording adding minimal diffusion. The piece was inspired by a trip that the composer made to Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2001 and clearly demonstrates the compassion he developed for the country while there. The audience was presented with the sounds of subways, street scenes, birds and bandoneón. Most of the processing heard was subtle enough that it did not totally conceal the original source material while more synthetic sounds punctuating the drama at key moments.

Sain's piece was followed by another digitally recorded presentation by Chin-Chin Chen. The three movements of her work presented a variety of possibilities from very limited sources materials using just one percussion instrument per movement. The first movement explores the rhythmic possibilities of a wood block using delays and other effects. The second movement uses samples of a tam-tam and explores the timbre through a series of attack types. Finally, the

sounds of wind chimes begin the last movement with their characteristic ringing before being subjected to Chen's meticulous variations of pitch and attacks.

The concert concluded with another interactive work by Sam Hamm for clarinet and computer called *Fix-a-tion*. While Hamm monitored the computer running his custom electronics software, the clarinet part was played with finesse by Russell Brown. The slow bending of notes by the clarinet toward the beginning the piece gave the impression of an awakening creature. The piece includes many moments of impressive technical skill by the clarinetist as the electronics seemed to react to this material, extending it in ways that were at times subtle and at other points surprising.

After breaking for the rest of the afternoon, we gathered one last time for the final evening's concert. This concert featured mostly small chamber ensembles, some compositions for solo instruments and a one piece for full choir.

The concert began with a work for cello and interactive electronics, a piece by Anthony Cornicello entitled *I'll Have an Electric Mahabharata, Please*. For this performance, the cello part was performed passionately by our conference host, Kari Juusela. The musical material in the cello score was inspired by Hindustani music and was both extended by and, at times, enveloped by the sounds of the interactive electronics. The rich and complex timbres that arose from the electronics software surrounded the audience through a four channel sound system and filled the already live concert space.

Next we heard a trio entitled *Equilibrium* written by Chihchun Lee and performed by Haiqiong Deng on zheng (a traditional Chinese plucked-string instrument that is the precursor to the perhaps more familiar Japanese koto), Chun-yu Chen on violin and Ryan Lewis on marimba. The zheng part was marked with idiomatic gestures including pitch bending and tremolos that would accelerate and decelerate. These were mimicked by the two Western members of the trio as the work oscillated between sparse sections with free rhythm and segments of unison with more frantic melodic materials.

Third, the Stetson University Choir, under the direction of Duncan Couch, gave a stirring performance of Mark Kilstofte's *Beauty*. Kilstofte gave this nineteenth-century poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins a simple, homophonic setting with only the briefest of polyphonic deviations. The simple beauty of the vocal harmonies was not only a fitting treatment for a text dealing with life's simple pleasures, but also provided a wonderful contrast to some of the concert's more complex works.

After this, we heard *Senderos que se Bifurcan* by Charles Norman Mason performed by Lynn Musco on clarinet and Tammy Miller on Piano. The piece opened with a lively section of driving rhythms and virtuosic runs for the clarinetist. This gave way to a second section in which the clarinetist played into open piano and assisted with some of the preparation effects. The final segment

returned to the pace of the original and built toward a final sprint for the end of the piece.

Next on the concert was John White's piece for solo trombone as performed by David Johansen entitled *Tragetestthoc*. The opening arpeggiations were given just the right amount of space by Johansen to ring inside the reverberant concert hall, so that the notes would almost hang in the air creating sustained chords. A slow, contemplative muted section set the stage for a rhythmic drive toward the finale that used portions in the brilliant, high range of the instrument. The work closed by returning to the slower material once more for its final coda.

The audience then welcomed Ms. Deng back to the stage with her zheng. This time, she performed a duet with Richard Scruggs on soprano saxophone called *CRUSH* by composer Michael Timpson. The duet opened with the zheng playing sustained tremolos under a slow saxophone melody before an exchange of slap tongues and hard picks. Each player had to manage multiple lines within their individual parts resulting in an overall feeling of angularity. The work then dropped into a dance rhythm that allowed the pair to truly play together before returning to the exchange of ideas found at the beginning. The dance finally reemerged to conclude the duet of these two splendid performers.

Sabin Levi followed with a performance of his own work for organ entitled *Triptych* on the concert hall's beautiful 54-rank Beckerath organ. The three movements referenced by the title began with a first that expanded from a simple voicing to settle into an exploration of parallel and contrary melodic motion. The second movement featured two darting melodies that once stated, continued to interrupt each other in a disjointed exchange. The third and final movement presented a more Romantic-styled melody that was again developed through a series of fragmentations.

The concert continued with another composer/performer as Mark Francis performed his *Intermezzo* for guitar before the audience. His work presented a jaunty melody set in triple meter followed by a slower motive with a freer rhythmic feel. These two ideas were juxtaposed against one another in sequences that explored the possibilities of each idea separately.

To conclude the evening and the conference, we heard a trio written by Bryan Burkett entitled *A Little Night Music* that was performed by Trio Bel Canto. This ensemble features Patrick Meighan on alto saxophone, John S. Moore on tenor saxophone and Krista Wallace-Boaz on piano. Burkett's trio provided an energetic close to the concert with a mixture of saxophones wailing sustained notes and wandering, quarter-tone motives while the pianist covered the length of the keyboard. Among these elements were quasi-Romantic melodies that somehow worked in their given context.

Overall, the pieces and performances of this final conference day were well worth the trip many made to be present. They showed the great variety of musical styles being explored by SCI's members and reaffirmed the organization's commitment to ensuring the performance of contemporary music by outstanding musicians at its annual conferences.