

He Sings The Body Eclectic

09/14/2008

Flea Theatre, 41 White Street, New York

New York Art Ensemble presents music by Neil Rolnick: *A Robert Johnson Sampler* (1987, rev. 2005) – *Neighborhood Ears* (2002) – *Shadow Quartet* (2003) – *The Economic Engine* (2008)

Music From China: Wang Guowei (erhu), Helen Yee (yanguin), Ann Yao (guzheng), Sun Li (pipa) – Todd Reynolds String Quartet: Todd Reynolds, Benjamin Russell (violins), Nadia Sirota (viola), Ha-yang Kim (cello) – Neil Rolnick (laptop and computer), Victor Schultz (violin)
Cindy Ng Sio Ieng (video), Adam Kendall (video processing and performance), Scott Smallwood (audio production), Todd Reynolds (Musical Director)

The music of Neil Rolnick is almost suspiciously diverse. Those aware only of his reputation might question not only his fecundity but his eclecticism. The composer is a pioneer in computer music, and his American inspirations range from classic blues to jazz to street-sounds, minimalist harmonies, chamber music and the usual concerto forms. But where other composers have specialized in a particular “exotic” music (Lou Harrison for Chinese, Colin McPhee for Balinese, Bruce Gaston for Thai music), Neil Rolnick (no relation to this writer) has worked from modalic Balkan music, and Indonesian gamelan to the Chinese music in the final work on this four-part concert at Flea Theatre in the West Village.

That aforesaid suspicion is understood for those wishing their composer to be in a “school” or a box. Theoretically, Rolnick’s music could wander all over the globe. In practice, he has a consistency which is as unique as any serious composer today. Briefly put, Rolnick’s music has a pulse, a throbbing dancing energy which never stops. This pulse can be hidden, partitioned into arpeggionic particles or a quantum wave. It can swing from one instrument to another, but it is always present.

Perhaps the never-stopping rhythm is like a Balinese gamelan, but Rolnick’s music doesn’t simply exist for the form: it dances.

Note that this is not a stressful series of beats. The basic tonality (and sudden modulations) gives it a lightness, no matter how serious the subject. But one always feels that each measure is urgent, that the notes, whether from a single computer sampling or the complex nonet of the final work, is inevitable, that a mere transition would be a waste of the listener’s time.

This started simply with an early work based on the unique blues singer Robert Johnson, played on computer keyboard. It begins with a few introductory blues passages, but gradually increases in “effects” the usual sampling reverbs, lines repeating each other, a few Johnson vocals which are duplicated like a funky church choir. But never is the energy missing.

(Well, I say “never”, but a minute of wretched church-organ music in the middle seems somewhat out of place. Rolnick has his reasons, but I couldn’t fathom them.)

The following work, *Neighborhood Ears*, was based upon the sounds of Rolnick’s Washington Heights streets, with the blurred, patchy yet somehow affecting video of the G.W. Bridge. Energy was of course implicit here, but Rolnick had the ideal partner in the sounds of a pile driver, which not only served as percussion, but was transformed into an engaging tune toward the end.

(It brought me back to a childhood visit of our school class to John Cage’s Greenwich Village sound-proof basement apartment with a window on the sidewalk. “And what kind of music do you like?” he asked our class. We answered jazz or Richard Strauss or Mozart,

and he said, "Well, this is what I like."

(Cage then opened the sidewalk window an inch, and we could suddenly hear cars, walking, screeches, a dog barking. After three seconds, he closed the window and we were sound-proofed again!)

Rolnick's *Shadow Quartet* is an homage to his Texas father, and the electronic string quartet with computer played—or danced—through a series of songs and rhythms, where even the adagio of the second movement had an almost visceral movement.

The Flea Theatre audience wanted to know, though, what Rolnick would do with the Chinese music of *The Economic Engine*, which he wrote during his fourth visit to China, at the Shanghai Conservatory. Here, not only the string quartet, but a Chinese quartet of plucked, bowed, fretted instruments, and the video of Cindy Ng Sio Ieng would play four movements. Would we have a Tan Dun-style alteration of styles? A movie score of kitschy synthesis?

Rolnick never took the easy path out. The Chinese music was played with the same virtuosity as the string quartet, but the sounds—more metallic, more resonant, even jumpier—offered that diversity in which Rolnick excels.

The movements—"Traffic", "Farm To Factory" (beginning with pure Chinese folk melodies), and "Opaque Air" each had their own vibrancy. But "From Hutong To High-Rise" (hutong is a traditional Beijing courtyard-house) was special. It started as a barn dance, and quickly turned into a Chinese version of Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*. Not literally, but if Copland needed to compose for these instruments, he would have arrived with the same syncopated folkish energetic finale.

Some months ago, I read Rolnick's essay on visiting China, and specifically recall a paragraph where he mentions that the Chinese students and practitioners seemed to master almost everything—except composing music for the beauty of the music itself. Those of us who lived any time near China had the same feeling. But Rolnick, in his years of expertise, humor and appreciation, has actually turned the synthesis of Chinese and European instruments into a thing of wonderment and, above all, joy.

Reviewed by Harry Rolnick (no relation to the composer ...)