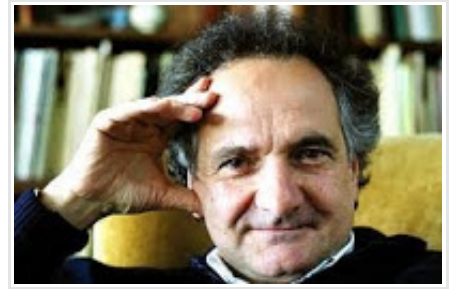


Monday, April 9, 2012

The Israel Contemporary Players conducted by Christian Eggen

Luca Lombardi

The fourth concert of the Israel Contemporary Players' 2011-2012 Discoveries Series took place at the Jerusalem Music Centre April 1st 2012. The concert was directed by Norwegian conductor Christian Eggen (b.1957). Eggen made his debut as a solo pianist (classical and jazz) in 1973. His international career as a conductor was launched at the 1990 ISCM World Music Days in Oslo. Eggen also composes, mostly for theatre and television. Much in demand today as a conductor, he is well known for his in-depth understanding of modern music.



The program opened with Bent Sørensen's work "The Deserted Churchyards". Born in 1958, Sørensen is considered the leading Danish composer of his generation. Scored for violin, 'cello, flute, clarinet, piano and percussion, the title "The Deserted Churchyards" (1990) refers to several churchyards along the western coast of northern Jutland, in locations that were formerly inland, now close to eroding beaches being ravaged by the sea. Not a program work, the composer refers to its title as "only an association". It is, however, a delicate collage using light and dark "colors", a fascinating use of single and mixed timbres depicting a strange, grey, moody world. The piece itself is economical and effective; the ICP performance was one of precision and lucidity.

In 1938, violinist József Szigeti approached Béla Bartók, requesting him to compose a duo for violin and clarinet with piano accompaniment, a work consisting of two contrasting movements, with a cadenza for each solo instrument. The work - "Contrasts" - was, however, officially commissioned by American jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman. One wonders if Goodman was not expecting a jazzy little concert piece; the work Bartok came up with was a high quality, three-movement chamber work whose fabric is made of Hungarian- and Rumanian folk music, as well as meters suggesting Bulgarian and Greek music. Originally titled "Rhapsody", it (in its original form consisting of the two outer movements) was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1939, performed by Szigeti, Goodman and pianist Endre Petri. In 1940, it was performed at Carnegie Hall once again, but, this time, as "Contrasts", in its three-movement form and played by Szigeti, Goodman and Bartok himself. The movements are titled "Verbunkos" (Recruiting Dance, a dance used from about 1780-1849, when the Austro-Hungarian government was encouraging conscription), "Pihenő" (Relaxation) and "Sebes" (Fast Dance). We heard "Contrasts" played by Yael Barolsky (violin), Gilad Harel (clarinet) and Ofra Yitzhaki (piano). The artists gave an articulate, well-defined reading of the work, from the mildly jazz-tinted whimsical and nostalgic opening movement, through the magical middle movement with its nocturnal nature scene in which violin and clarinet play together, with comments by the piano, to the final wickedly humorous third movement with its complex rhythmic figures. Bartok's fine writing was highlighted throughout by the players; the score calls for the clarinetist to change from A-flat clarinet to B-flat clarinet and back again and for the violin to tune differently (scordatura) in the final movement, the latter suggesting folk music of a rougher idiom. An outstanding performance.

Luca Lombardi's (b.1945, Rome) education and professional life straddle both Germany and Italy, placing him in the most divergent of cultures. A student of Stockhausen, he wrote a dissertation on Hanns Eisler; he lived, studied and was performed in both Germanys, standing up for his political and aesthetic ideals. He studied piano and composition in Rome, Florence, Vienna, Cologne and Berlin. His PhD from Rome University is in German language and literature. From 1973 to 1993, he taught composition at the conservatories of Pesaro and Milan. His oeuvre includes opera, orchestral music, chamber- and solo music. With a passion for the music of Stravinsky and Bartók, Lombardi had deep contact with the avant-garde movement. In 1982, he explained the existence of different styles in his works through the concepts of "ex-clusive" (the possibility of creating complex forms from greatly reduced materials) and "inclusive" (the will to include multiple musical "behaviours"). In the 1970s Lombardi

was composing for electronic instruments, but meantime has returned to more conventional scoring, making much use of the flute as of the late 1990s: this came about from his having come across some excellent flautists, but the composer also sees the flute as “close to the sound of nature...at the very origin of everything – of life itself”. Today Luca Lombardi divides his time between Lago Albano (near Rome) and Jaffa (Israel).

“Infra” for 11 instruments refers to ‘depth’ (as in infrastructure), an association referred to by the composer as activity below the earth’s surface or in our own sub-conscious. The work was composed in 1997 in Italy, where the composer’s house looks out onto Lake Albano, a small volcanic crater lake; he uses a scale he constructed as the result of his encounter with Jewish music. The work opens with an uncompromising combination of low, (sometimes buzzing) sounds, the basis of the work, to which the composer returns again and again. Solo instruments introduce new tints – high ‘cello sounds, nostalgic chimes, a drum solo... But the lion’s share of solo-playing is scored, not unexpectedly, for the flute. The several flute solo sections were handled superbly by Dafna Yitzhaki, who literally breathed meaning into the large variety of effects and gestures, some breathy and distant, others introducing a flow of ideas like distant and disturbing memories. Yitzhaki paces the solos strategically, taking time to give each motif expression; she uses her fantasy to give meaning to each idea, to paint the ideas in eerie hues onto a canvas of haunting silence. The listener who is willing to confront “Infra” is well rewarded. This was the work’s Israeli premiere. Ambassador for Italy in Israel Luigi Mattiolo was present at the concert, as was the composer himself.

The concert concluded with György Ligeti’s (1923-2006) Chamber Concerto for eleven orchestral instruments: piano doubling celesta, harpsichord doubling Hammond organ, flute doubling piccolo, oboe doubling oboe d’amore and cor anglais, clarinet, bass clarinet doubling second clarinet, horn, trombone, two violins, viola, ‘cello and double bass. Melody and motifs do not form the basic fabric of the four movements: each, however, focuses on a specific quality of musical expression. Composed 1969/1970, at a time the composer was exploring micro-polyphony and was emerging as a leading member of the international avant-garde, the Chamber Concerto is a concerto for each of the instruments. The listener becomes aware of elements of melody, counterpoint and harmony, but no less of Ligeti’s textural ideas – clusters in which the notes seem to suddenly take on individual life, moving like insects, muted chord effects, fast repeated, witty, percussive notes (as in movement 3 – *Movimento preciso e meccanico*) and eerie, trippy screens of sound, the instrumental textures being thread through stereo speakers. And there are also the horrific shrieks and shaking effects, never far away from Ligeti’s soul and drawing-board. A Jew born in Transylvania, he survived the Second World War in a labour camp; his brother and father perished in Auschwitz. Commenting on the emotions shaping his creative utterances, he was quoted as saying “I am permanently scarred; I will be overcome by revenge fantasies to the end of my days”. The Israel Contemporary Players, most of them young artists, took on the challenge of this work with the utmost of competence, giving it a sensitive, finely-detailed reading, their treatment of the text, on all its levels, making for compelling listening.

It was an interesting and inspiring evening of music. The Israel Contemporary Players’ concerts offer high quality programs. Their players are committed to bringing fine performance of modern music to Israeli audiences. The auditorium of the Jerusalem Music Centre is the ideal venue for this music.

Posted by Pamela Hickman at 7:15 AM

Labels: Bartok, Ligeti, Lombardi, Sorensen