



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Jorja Fleezanis and Alan Feinberg, playing Robert Helps's Fantasy for Violin and Piano at Cooper Union.

MUSIC REVIEW

Honoring One Known for Romanticism

By ALLAN KOZINN

Robert Helps was an inventive composer whose works found many champions and a superb pianist who promoted other composers' music as avidly as his own. Mr. Helps died at 73 last November, and on Saturday evening a fairly starry assembly of his colleagues and admirers presented a free concert in his honor in the Great Hall at Cooper Union.

Several composers were on hand: Milton Babbitt offered introductory comments (as did the new-music soprano Bethany Beardslee), and David Del Tredici was among the performers, but scattered through the audience one also spotted George Perle, Aaron Jay Kernis, Raphael Mostel, Joan Tower and several others.

The program included seven of Mr. Helps's works, composed between 1950 and 1998 and ably representing the breadth of his compositional interests. The pianist Richard Goode opened the program with a sensitive, beautifully flowing performance of the "Hommage à Fauré" (1971). This deceptively pretty work begins in the style of a Fauré Barcarole with a simple melody supported by a gracefully arpeggiated figure. As it evolves, the ar-

peggiation grows increasingly complex, until it is more decidedly in Mr. Helps's style than Fauré's, yet the simple, repeating melody that holds the spotlight remains constant.

The other piano works on the program showed very different sides of Mr. Helps's relationship with his instrument. The Three Études (1956), which Mr. Del Tredici played with an electrifying energy, are fast, loud and harmonically dense. But their salient feature, evident in Mr. Del Tredici's reading, is a sense of humor so wry that one could feel it in the music without being able to explain how or why, although part of the humor is in the way the dazzling lines collapse toward an ending in each of the Études.

Alan Feinberg offered a warm-toned account of the last of the solo piano works here, a pair of fantasies based on 19th-century art songs — Mendelssohn's "Schilflied" (1988) and Chabrier's "Chanson Pour Jeanne" (1998) — in which Mr. Helps allowed his innate Romanticism free range.

That spirit could also be heard, though tempered slightly by more updated chromaticism, in two vocal settings of Melville texts from 1950, performed by Haleh Abghari, a soprano, and Idith Meshulam, a pianist.

Also on the program were selections from Mr. Helps's chamber works. Jorja Fleezanis, the violinist, was supported by Mr. Feinberg in the Fantasy for Violin and Piano (1963), a work similar to the "Hommage à Fauré" in its juxtaposition of a lyrical, meditative melody line, played by the violin, against spikier figuration in the piano. Mr. Del Tredici was joined by Karl Kramer, a hornist, and Philp Wharton, a violinist, for the "Postlude: Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano" (1964), a splashy, animated three-way conversation.

The most expansive work on the program was a Piano Quartet (1997), a rugged, evocative work, full of unusual twists. Stretches of the work are hazy, mysterious and even brooding, and a listener was tempted to associate them with Ms. Beardslee's reference to Mr. Helps's periods of debilitating depression. These were in some ways the most compelling parts of the piece, but they invariably gave way to brighter, more energetic writing, which suggested that the shadows could be shaken off.

The program ended with "The Life and Playing of Robert Helps," a 10-minute film with photographs of Mr. Helps from childhood on and a recording of one of his performances on the soundtrack.