

June 18, 2003

A Birthday Party Livened, by Interconnecting Arrays

By ANNE MIDGETTE

The American Composers Alliance has hit retirement age. Ah, let's rephrase that. The organization, founded by Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions in 1937 to further the role of the composer in America, celebrated its 65th birthday last weekend with six concerts of music by past and present members. The anniversary concert itself, on Saturday night, commemorated Sessions with music by him and his "students and grandstudents": Milton Babbitt studied with Sessions, George Edwards studied with Mr. Babbitt, and so on.

Over time organizations can get clubby, and this band of "uptown" composers seemed all the more so through presenting their concerts in the elegant Kosciuszko Foundation on East 65th Street in Manhattan, against a backdrop of gilt-framed works by Polish masters, velvet drapes and an air-conditioner with a quiet, insistent rattle.

The unwritten charter of this particular club involves a brand of intellectually sanctioned music steeped in serialist tradition and complex atonal theory. The program note for the Chamber Concerto by Hubert Howe, the group's president, gives an idea: "The piece is based on a series of pentachordal arrays that exclude the collection 02350. . . a group of trichordal arrays that are embedded in these arrays, and another group of tetrachordal arrays that use the same interconnecting arrays."

These statements fail to convey much about what Mr. Howe's piece, in its world premiere, sounded like: sounds piled together in ways more interesting to the ear in their juxtapositions than in, say, their phrasing. If you didn't have the proof of the incredible underlying complexity of the work, you might almost think it was a little simplistic.

By the same token, Sessions's reputation as the founding father of this particular club doesn't convey the sheer sturdy craftsmanship of his "Duo for Violin and Piano." The piece tugs at the moorings of tonality but is dominated less by tonality than by simple, solid tone, showcased both through the composer's excellent sense of pacing and a rousing performance by Philip Wharton, a violinist. Nor does Mr. Babbitt's status as a thorny serialist reflect the quirky humor that pervades pieces like "Around the Horn" (1993), essentially a stand-up routine for a virtuoso soloist, excellently communicated by Karl Kramer.

The evening's highlights were pieces that didn't strictly toe the party line. Mr. Sessions's students included enfants terribles like David del Tredici, whose "Virtuoso Alice," here adequately performed by the composer, should be programmed by star pianists. It is large-scale, heart-on-the-sleeve music that keeps winking at the listener, archly cocking its head as if to say, "Call me a guilty pleasure; I dare you," and then doing something startling and wonderful and fun.

Andrew Violette ended the evening with another blow in the face of staid tradition by placing seven musicians around the room for "Six Performances" and setting each of them off on a different difficult musical line. The experience was akin to sitting in the middle of a tuning orchestra, partly marvelous and partly headache-inducing, but new and bold, we'll certainly grant him.