

Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Dec. 4)

by Timothy Robson



The Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble gave a rock-solid and virtuosic concert on Sunday afternoon, December 4, in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Director Timothy Weiss assembled a program of eclectic works by leading composers of our day, all of which received

professional-level performances by the student ensemble.

The oldest work, Steve Reich's *Vermont Counterpoint* (1982), was written for flutist Ransom Wilson and a pre-recorded ensemble of nine flutes plus a pre-recorded solo flute. In this performance all eleven parts were performed live, with Aram Mun as soloist. Surely this performance involved a significant number of the flute students at Oberlin.

Although she stood out front, the use of live flutists often caused Mun's solo to be indistinguishable from the rest of the ensemble. Reich's music requires absolute precision of rhythm and pitch, and only in a very few short moments did the synchronization subtly waver. Several treacherous tempo transitions were spot-on.

Oberlin faculty member Haewon Song was featured in Judith Weir's *Piano Concerto* (1997), an excellent example of the composer's rhapsodic, colorful, sometimes ecstatic style. Scored for string orchestra, the work is in three short movements. The first features bright piano arpeggios against sustained chords, and luxurious, tonal harmonies against spiky dissonances. The second movement is an overt nod to Weir's heritage in its fragmentary reworking of the Scottish folksong *The Sweet Primroses*. Chiming piano chords, contrasted with mellow low-string passages, give the movement a melancholy feel. The third movement is full of dance-like energy.

Haewon Song was in command of the considerable technical challenges of the solo part, especially the brilliant clarity required in the sparkling, bell-like passages. This is an unusual and striking concerto that deserves to be taken up by more pianists and chamber orchestras.

Soprano Ruby Dibble was the spectacular soloist in Jacob Druckman's song cycle *Counterpoise* (1994), originally written for Dawn Upshaw and the Philadelphia Orchestra. This performance used Druckman's reduction for flute, clarinet, horn, trombone, piano, percussion, violin, and cello. Druckman sets two poems by Emily Dickinson, separated by two French poems by Guillaume Apollinaire. The vocal line is tonal but angular, with huge leaps embedded into the phrases.

Apollinaire's *Salomé* is particularly lurid, the Judean princess seemingly having second thoughts about asking for John the Baptist's severed head. The accompaniment is trudging and ponderous. Dibble, her diction uncommonly clear, was fearless in her delivery, her lyric voice sailing out over the often chattering, busy accompaniment.

Augusta Read Thomas's *Selene: Moon Chariot Rituals* (2015) could almost be described as a concerto for four percussionists and string quartet. Selene, the moon goddess of mythology, drives her moon chariot across the night sky. Thomas's music is highly energetic, and at times the intense percussion playing threatened to take over completely. Several of the mallet passages resemble the birdsong music of Olivier Messiaen. Many individual moments were colorful, though it was difficult to chart Selene's trajectory through the whole work. Kudos to percussionists Carson Fratus, Justin Gunter, Louis Pino, and Hunter Brown.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 12, 2016.

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