

CAMPIONSHIP IN BERKELEY---VIA TEXAS AND PARIS

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artssf.com, the independent observer of San Francisco Bay Area music

Week of March 24-31, 2005

Vol. 7, No. 67

After hearing just two of his compositions, there is no doubt in my mind that Edmund Campion, 47, ranks among the most resourceful and inventive of our Northern California composers.

In his makeup, Campion combines a smorgasbord of venues and influences: Upbringing in Texas, a doctorate from Columbia, extensive service at Boulez' IRCAM (music R&D) site in Paris, and in recent years faculty member at the University of California Berkeley. The Paris part remains unmistakable in his admirable quarter-hour concerto "Outside Music" which got its world premiere March 22 with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the thriving new-music group now in its 35th (!) year.

Campion sought to get outside the usual rituals of new music, providing some fresh perspectives. And here he was supreme without being radical. It's a jocular syncopated piece, in the buoyant spirit of Darius Milhaud, with chords recalling Debussy, but in a fresh new way, digressing to snatches of pointillism and progressive jazz. He ranks, along with John Adams and a small handful of others, among those able to combine engrossing musical shapes with entertaining formats. His work is mildly dissonant, without pandering to devotees of old-fashioned consonance and rigidity.

It's not your every-day concerto. Soloist Julie Steinberg, in her best music-theater mode, sat at a keyboard controlling both a sampler and a computer, surrounded by an unorthodox instrumental quintet (string bass, bass clarinet, and three high instruments), plus congenial electronic gurgles stored on the computer, some of them indistinguishable from familiar instrumental sounds. There's a lot of lively noodling and staccato carrying on, and a big cadenza for the soloist, plus some electronic-only playback leaving Steinberg listening with contented bemusement, her hands crossed before her.

But what every one will remember longest is the departure finale, as the musicians, one by one, depart the scene. This opus goes one better than Haydn's "Farewell Symphony," because the last player (Steinberg) also departs, leaving to the electronics the last word. It was immense fun, in a SFCMP forum far more likely in the past to produce deathly serious cerebral ensemble pieces.

But however much this ensemble may reflect innovations of tomorrow's music-making, don't look for it to turn up at your neighborhood concert series. Steinberg, who in her regular life is a concert pianist and chamber player, spent literally months mastering

the complex synthesizer cum pedals before entering the Championship rehearsals.

Campion's duo-piano piece "A Complete Wealth of Time" (1990) uses as its springboard Campion's dream sequence of a Paris museum full of skeletons, and a figure of Death making commentary about evolution. (Gad, dreams like this could turn any one into an avid composer!) It's a fast-paced 20-finger exercise, with some shimmering Debussyan runs, but a marvelous American freedom of spirit. I loved its momentum and technical challenges. The rhythmic complexity, with "misaligned" accents, would drive lesser players up the wall. The two, Vicki Ray and Gloria Cheng from Southern California, barely get a chance to breathe in this elaborate 17-minute variations piece built up out of a four-note theme of disarming simplicity.

Campion has a thing about whimsical finales. In this one, the two pianists take turns hitting a "final" fortissimo chord, each intent to being the last. And it's repeated long enough and often enough to convey the satire of duo-piano competitiveness.

Dadaistic frivolity characterized another new piece, "Save As," by New Yorker Fred Frith, 55. The percussion-cello duo punctuated their play with coffee cans clattering across the stage, metallic tremolos, paper-crumpling, even a nail getting hammered. Cellist Joan Jeanrenaud did cello reveries in close coordination with expert percussionist William Winant working a veritable arsenal of (mostly) gentle instruments.

It was a one-time novelty, along the lines of Foss' "Baroque Variations." Frith appeared to echo real-life experiences, where interruptions are the rule, and moods, whether postmodern or otherwise, are made to be broken.

Pieces for cello solo rounded out the program, calling on the indefatigable Jeanrenaud for repeat duty.

NOTES---Of particular note in "Outside Music" was the use of deft soft-green lighting design playing on the acoustical shell. In light of the great success of lighting elements over the years, encountered both at Kronos Quartet concerts as well as the Cabrillo Music Festival in Santa Cruz, I wonder why so few concert promoters ever introduce it as the extra dimension. Innovation, folks, innovation!

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players at the Yerba Buena Theater, 3rd and Howard, San Francisco. Next concert April 25. For info: (415) 978-2787, or go [on-line](#).

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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a

certain amount of salsa -- for years.