



CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Surprising Blends

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Joan Jeanrenaud



Edmund Campion

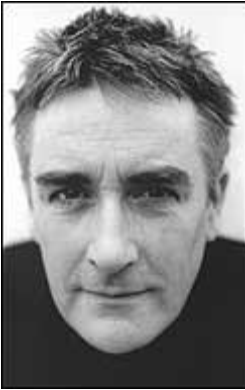


By **Jonathan Russell**

The Bay Area is fortunate to have a large number of ensembles devoted to performing new music. But what exactly is “new music” today, stylistically speaking? Is it Minimalism? Complex textural music? Free improvisation? Pop-classical crossover music? Electronic music? Neo-romantic music? These all fall under the umbrella of “new music,” yet they engage very different, in some cases opposite, aesthetic sensibilities. Is there any common ground to be found? On Tuesday at the Yerba Buena Center, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players offered a concert that not only touched on many of these different areas of contemporary music but also featured two pieces that incorporated several of them each into single, unified works. I was further pleased to see that the music on this concert was truly new — with the exception of one piece from the ancient days of 1990, all were from 2003 or later, including three world premieres — and that all but one of the composers were from the Bay Area.

The most fascinating and innovative piece on the program was its closer, the premiere of UC Berkeley professor Edmund Campion’s *Outside Music* for a chamber ensemble of flute, bass clarinet, harp, double bass, vibraphone, and a special keyboard-controlled sampler/computer that Campion invented specifically for this piece. This keyboard, played with panache and virtuosity by Julie Steinberg, triggered samples by means of two foot pedals that could each be in the up or down position, for four possible combinations; and by keys sensitive to three levels of touch — soft, medium, and hard. Each combination of pedal positions and keystroke type would trigger a different sample. I haven’t done the mathematics, but clearly this creates an enormous number of possibilities and makes for a sort of 21st-century organ. In this case, the samples, which were not just single pitches but whole patterns and licks, were of all the acoustic instruments in the ensemble, with the addition of a few drum sounds. It

Julie Steinberg



Fred Frith



was often hard to tell whether a sound came from a live instrument or from the keyboard — and not only for the audience; as the piece began with bass clarinet samples coming from the keyboard, bass clarinetist Carey Bell looked quizzically at his instrument as if to ask “how’d you do that?”

But far from being merely a technological curiosity, the piece was also harmonically rich, full of fascinating textures and colors, and rhythmically funky and grooving. Someone I spoke to after the concert complained that the piece had a retro-1970’s “Switched-on Bach” feel to it. I would basically agree with the statement, but not with its tone of voice — I loved the vitality that this brought to the piece, creating a fresh and original combination of electronics, complex texture, and pop/minimalist-derived groove.

Uncanny bot

Near the end of the piece, the non-keyboard members of the ensemble casually walked off the stage and we were left with Julie Steinberg and the keyboard, bathed in a purplish spotlight. Finally, Steinberg triggered her last sample and walked off too, leaving just the keyboard burbling and chirping away for another minute or so until the piece ended. In a way, it was eerie to see electronics with so much personality, sounding so human; but on the other hand, it could not have worked as a purely electronic piece; it needed the live acoustic of live instruments, and the excitement and *imprecision* of the human touch. And the electronics themselves were all pre-recorded samples of real instruments played by real people, and were performed by the real Steinberg with uniquely human virtuosity and flair.

Holding it all together was the clear, precise, and energetic beating of conductor David Milnes. If this piece is any indication, it appears that electronics have finally grown up and are heading the way of such instruments as the piccolo and the xylophone; originally novelties, they have become subsumed into the wider world of musical instruments. No

longer confined to its own abstruse realm, electronics can now be seamlessly integrated into any style or aesthetic.

Another piece that successfully merged several new music categories was Fred Frith's delightful *Save As*, also a premiere, for Joan Jeanrenaud on cello and William Winant on an array of percussion instruments. The piece began with a quick up-and-down cello glissando followed by a soft bass drum hit and then a gentle, almost silly unison pentatonic melody for cello and marimba. This set the tone for the whole piece, which was a fascinating interplay between purely textural parts and simple quasi-minimalist parts, either meditative, rhythmic, or lyrical. The textural parts included many curious, sometimes humorous sounds, such as ripping wax paper, crumpling paper, dropping a ping-pong ball on the floor, hammering a nail into a piece of wood, and unexpectedly knocking metal cans onto the floor.

Coruscations

Structurally, similar parts kept coming back, but they were always a little bit different and the piece was always moving on in surprising, yet entirely satisfying new directions, a captivating and seamless fusion of styles and elements — not a John Zorn-style pastiche, but a true integration of diverse components. The ending was magical: in an easy-going tempo, the cello kept playing upward moving scales that varied in length against unpredictable syncopations of jazzy vibraphone chords, getting softer and softer, fading into the distance, ending with a barely audible bass drum thump. Jeanrenaud and Winant did a good job capturing the great variety of moods and colors, though they could have appreciated and then played up the humor of the piece a bit more.

Frith's piece was the third of three on the concert's first half written specifically for and performed by former Kronos Quartet cellist and active champion of new music, Joan Jeanrenaud. The first, the premiere of Terry Riley's *Olde English* for solo cello,

was simple and beautiful, a slow-moving meditation on the pure resonance of the cello's open strings (the lower three of which were tuned down a half-step) and natural harmonics, followed by a more harmonically complex but tonal section reminiscent of the Bach solo cello suites, and a return back to the opening material.

The next, New York composer Annie Gosfield's *The Harmony of the Body-Machine*, was written very much in collaboration with Jeanrenaud, taking advantage of the cellist's strengths and idiosyncracies to write extended techniques and special effects that sounded completely comfortable and natural. The piece also featured pre-recorded cello sounds and various machine sounds, which fit surprisingly well with Jeanrenaud's intense and grainy tone. In spite of her mastery of the many techniques the piece called for, it never really took off, feeling more like a succession of interesting sounds than a fully-formed composition.

After intermission, Campion's 1990 *A Complete Wealth of Time* for two pianos, performed with precision and power by Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray, was a complex and busy piece, reminiscent of Ligeti's *Etudes* for piano. The work is consistently engaging, and displays the mastery of complex rhythmic and harmonic procedures evident in the concert-closing *Outside Music*, but it lacks the latter's breadth of imagination and invention, and the almost constantly busy piano texture began to get tiring.

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[Top of Page](#) [Homepage](#)