

San Francisco Classical Voice
Contemporary Music Review

Composers Inc., War Memorial Performing Arts Center, October 14, 2008
Soldering On

By Jules Langert

This year, Composers Inc. marks its 25th anniversary as an active, vital musical presence in the San Francisco Bay Area. Over the years, its loyal, supportive audiences have been grateful for the broadly eclectic programming and consistently high level of performances they have heard. Although a listener might not always agree with their choice of music, Composers Inc. has achieved a good track record for an impressively long period.

In a spirit of celebration, then, for its season opener last Tuesday in the Veterans Building Green Room, the group commissioned pieces from no fewer than seven composers.

Richard Felciano's *Festa* got things off to a bright, vivid start, as pianist Marc Shapiro and vibraphonist Jack Van Geem built up a shimmering texture of toccata-like patterns punctuated by long-held, resonant sonorities, evoking the sound of chimes and bells pulsating with energy.

At the other end of the program, Matthew Cmiel's rambunctious *Dance Like Mad* closed the concert with percussionists Van Geem, Artie Storch, and Ward Spangler cooking up a raucous din at center stage on an upended red bass drum. Heaps of additional percussion were augmented by exotic sounds from the "Lion's Roar" and a noisy battery of oil cans. Several episodes were begun after a coin was flicked onto the bass drumhead, its sound of gently rolling thunder spreading to the other instruments and generating some extravagant antiphonal responses.

Probing Keyboard and String Sounds

The remainder of the program was made up of instrumental duos and trios, the most interesting and memorable of which was Edmund Campion's *From Swan Songs*. This work grew out of discussions and collaborations between the composer and violinist David Abel. It attempts to add various avant-garde sounds and techniques to the violin's traditional performance practices, and to integrate them with the piano.

Abel and pianist Julie Steinberg formed a tightly knit duo, in which the two instruments complemented and reinforced each other. In the beginning, the piano's deeply resonant consonances formed a backdrop to the violin's harsh, scraping noises and disjunct, out-of-tune activity. Then, a flurry of fast string writing set off a complex piano arpeggio that seemed like an extension of the violin's resonance.

Episodes of fast runs and scales were echoed and amplified, as each performer tended to distort and reinterpret what the other had just done. There was a sense of mutual discovery — a kind of dialogue about how the two instruments might relate to one another in strikingly new ways, while conjuring up a group of sound images that were both fascinating and beautiful.

Cindy Cox's *Turner*, for viola and piano, is in many ways a similar kind of piece. Here the viola, played by Ellen Ruth Rose, used open strings and natural harmonics to find amplifying echoes in the piano, played by the composer. But the exploration of complementary sounds was heard as an end in itself: attractive, but not leading to further transformations. Instead, the spacious interactions remained self-contained and static.

Ann Calloway's *Ballade* for violin, horn, and piano, like the remaining two pieces on the program, was much more traditional, harking back to a post-Romantic style. There were modal elements and a somewhat folk-inspired idiom, like music by Vaughan Williams. The work had a pastoral charm, influenced by the horn, but its deft ensemble writing needed more of a bite, and possibly some unusual touches, to create a stronger impression.

Donald Crockett's *Wet Ink* was well-played by violinist Victor Romasevich and pianist Marilyn Thompson. It contained some brilliant violin writing, but there were too many musical clichés in a generic tonal context.

The seventh work (performed by Ann Miller, violin; Nina Flyer, cello; and Sonia Leong, piano) was Derek Jacoby's *Piano Trio No. 2*, which sounded self-conscious in its swooping and sighing romanticism, dominated by the strings. When the piano emerged, it was in a simplistically postmodern vein. At the end, a needlessly prolonged set of slow, repeated notes for the violin gradually and predictably faded into nothingness, as we in the audience waited impatiently for closure.