

Tanglewood festival celebrates diversity of contemporary music

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | August 6, 2006

In a preconcert chat with the audience for the last concert of the 2006 Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music Monday night, the firebrand British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage recalled his own student summer at the Tanglewood Music Center more than two decades ago.

He spoke of the liberating influence of composer and jazz historian Gunther Schuller, then the director of the TMC. "Composers don't have to write in a prescribed style anymore," Turnage said, adding that these days every style can coexist, and when composers mix them up, "it is not frowned upon."

The focus of this year's festival, which was curated by conductor Stefan Asbury with composer John Harbison as adviser, shifted to a younger generation of composers who are, like Turnage, willing to mix things up, and who have been underrepresented in previous editions of this festival. Andrew Norman, the youngest of the group, was born in 1979. Turnage is now in his mid-40s. Three of the composers -- Ron Ford, Mark Gustavson, and Stephen Jaffe -- were born in 1959.

Among the composers, there was an 18-year gap between Poul Ruders (b. 1949) and an older group, beginning with the late Donald Martino (b. 1931) and including Betsy Jolas, Pierre Boulez, Milton Babbitt, and Elliott Carter, listed by increasing seniority.

Turnage apart, most of the younger group seems more interested in carrying tradition forward, consolidating the legacy of the past, and addressing the expectations of the audience than in pushing the envelope the way their seniors did. This may be a factor of the festival's dependence on composers sheltered by academia rather than those making their way in the rough-and-tumble world outside the ivied walls.

Norman's "Gran Turismo" for eight violins (2004) was inspired in part by the baroque concerto grosso, in part by the video game of the same name. It's an exhilarating, classic exercise in perpetual motion constantly threatened by modern collisions en route.

There were two pieces by the Viennese composer Johannes Maria Staud (b. 1974).

"Black Moon" is an exposition of "extended techniques" for bass clarinet -- multiphonics and other devices, dazzlingly played by Amy Advocat. Much of it came across as sound effects, but there was more music in his cantata "Vielleicht zunaechst wirklich nur" ("perhaps soon truly only"), a series of Expressionist miniatures drawn from a poem about survival by Max Bense. This was vividly sung by soprano Katherine Whyte, demonstrating that demanding new-music vocalism doesn't have to sound ugly, and the chamber ensemble was expertly conducted by Eva Ollikainen.

Stephen Andrew Taylor's "Seven Memorials" is a large cycle for solo piano inspired

both by natural wonders and by the danger of the extinction of species. Four ``Memorials" were played. The music sounds like Ravel crossed with Scriabin. Guest artist Gloria Cheng, stepping in at short notice, played them with admirable agility but without much variety of touch and color.

Of the class of '59, Ford stood out for the mellifluous elegance of his piano trio ``Brandelli" and for his brand-new ``Versus," a vigorous concerto for violin and chamber orchestra in which the relationship between soloist (the excellent Yevgeny Kutik) and ensemble is almost always adversarial. Conductor Kazem Abdullah served as referee. Gustavson's Clarinet Quintet is formally ingenious and entertaining to hear. Jaffe's big, neo-Romantic Double Sonata for two pianos was an attractive but odd choice. It was played in the 1992 festival, and it would have been more interesting to hear what Jaffe has been up to lately.

Edmund J. Campion (b. 1957) was represented by ``Outside Music," a rambunctious piece for synthesizer and live instruments. The synthesizer is constantly invading the personal space of the instruments by duplicating their timbres. The piece ends, like Haydn's ``Farewell" Symphony, when the players leave the stage one by one, leaving the synthesizer, finally unattended, playing on all by itself.

Brandeis composer Eric Chasalow (b. 1955) contributed an engaging electronic piece, ``Crossing Boundaries," which is an audio family scrapbook, with shards of taped conversational reminiscence detonating the multiple strands of music; it is so personal that it becomes universal.

David Feldner (b. 1953) was represented by his Canzone XXXI for brass quintet, which bridges the antiphonal sounds and contrapuntal procedures of Venice in the 16th century and the kind of sonic firebombs hurled in 20th-century America by Edgard Varese. The Piano Concerto by Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen (b. 1952) is a lean, mean piece that suggests more than it actually says. It was intelligently played by David Kaplan, with conductor Nicolas Fink safely guiding the journey.

Ruders, also from Denmark, is a leading international figure; his opera ``The Handmaid's Tale," based on Margaret Atwood's novel, has been widely admired. His ``Psalmodies" for guitar and nine instruments is a well-constructed piece full of passion and pretty sounds. Guest guitarist David Starobin played with imagination, insight, and advocacy, and Tomasz Golka proved an alert conductor.

An intense and touching performance of the ``Lamento Adagio" from Gyorgy Ligeti's Horn Trio paid memorial tribute to the late Hungarian master (Andrew Jennings, violin, Ursula Oppens, piano, and James Sommerville, horn, were the players). It was good to hear Jacob Druckman's opulent, exploratory Second String Quartet again; it was played in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the composer's death.

The tributes to the late Boston composer Donald Martino were particularly moving. TMC fellows played excerpts from his ``Fantasies and Impromptus" for piano and his ``Three Sad Songs" for viola and piano. There was also a performance of the 26 completed measures of the Concertino for Violin that Martino was working on the day he died, music of astonishing, fresh energy of invention. This was followed by ``Don," an elegant musical portrait of the composer written by Babbitt on the occasion of Martino's 40th birthday.

There was a magisterial performance of Boulez's ``Messagesquise" for seven cellos (faculty member Norman Fischer was the soloist among them). And one of the most

exciting events of the festival was the belated American premiere of "Quatuor V" (1994) by Jolas, performed in celebration of her 80th birthday. Like most of her music, the quartet pushes the operation of intelligence to the gut level of powerful instinct, and the music positively glistens. The players (Benjamin Russell and Yuki Numata, violins, Nadia Sirota, viola, and Semiramis C. S. Costa, cello) were first rate.

Conclusions? Amid such diversity -- represented also by the opening-night American stage premiere of Carter's brainy but humane "What Next?" and Turnage's violent but tender "Blood on the Floor" -- conclusions are impossible, except to agree with Turnage that diversity is desirable, as it nearly always has been. Ever since composers became able to hear music they and their neighbors didn't write themselves -- first music from other places, then music from other times -- they have helped themselves to whatever struck their fancy.

Most music is in fact crossover, genre-disturbing, and style-jumping, written by composers who not only absorbed the past but listened to the wide world around them in order to hear more clearly their own inner voices. ■

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