

---

August 2, 2006  
Critic's Notebook

## The Classical and the Vernacular, a Cohesive Choice of the Contemporary

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

LENOX, Mass., Aug. 1 — Change comes slowly to the Festival of Contemporary Music, the Tanglewood Music Center's annual showcase for its virtuosic students and various currents of musical modernism. But it comes all the same. The trend, lately, has been to bring in a famous composer or new-music conductor to direct the festival, but this year the center turned to Stefan Asbury, a young English conductor who has been on the faculty here since 1995.

Mr. Asbury's most immediately striking contribution has been to make the programs cohesive, for the most part. In past years the programs were motley assemblies of works in various styles for ensembles of all sizes, with only the orchestral finale using the center's forces coherently. Not that it mattered: if programmatic unruliness has a place anywhere, it's at a new-music festival played by students, faculty and occasional guests.

Still, there is something to be said for Mr. Asbury's fastidiousness. The festival's finale, on Monday evening — Mark-Anthony Turnage's "Blood on the Floor" (1995), a dark, dramatic suite for jazz quartet and orchestra about drug use and the death of Mr. Turnage's brother from an overdose — mirrored the opening night opera trilogy. There, classical and vernacular styles mingled, in works by Hindemith and Stravinsky, and the shock of accidental death provided the creative spark, in Elliott Carter's "What's Next?"

Between those dramatic bookends, Mr. Asbury devoted one program entirely to string music, and another mostly to concertos (or at least, works for soloist and orchestra). Two chamber catchalls were built mainly around works with keyboard.

But for all that, Mr. Asbury kept the festival focused on what has happened and is happening in new music with few examples of the increasingly important populist side of contemporary composition (Mr. Turnage's work was an exception) and little to show what's on the horizon. A five-day festival can't get to everything, but it's time for this one to search more aggressively for signs of new music's future.

That isn't to say that the present and recent past are bankrupt. A chamber music program on Sunday morning touched on the ways composers are sorting out their world. At the most traditional end, David Felder's "Canzone XXXI" (1993), for brass quintet, drew on the antiphonal effects and symmetrical structure that Gabrieli used in his brass works in the late 16th century, but grafted on sizzling trumpet scoring and spicy chromaticism. Mark Gustavson's Clarinet Quintet (1995), one of the few works in the festival to so much as hint at Minimalism, mixed repeating figures and Gorecki-like, slow-moving chordal passages with dark, spiky chromaticism. And Gloria Cheng played four of Stephen Andrew Taylor's sparkingly tactile "Seven Memorials" (2004).

**The program also included two very different electronic works. Eric Chasalow's "Crossing Boundaries" (2000) made inventive use of voices and electronic timbres, but here the festival missed an opportunity to be more forward-looking: Mr. Chasalow's recent "Portraits" includes boundary-crossing tributes to Jimi Hendrix and [John Lennon](#).**

Edmund Campion's "Outside Music" (2005) had the benefit of humor. Scored for winds, harp, percussion, bass and synthesizer, it blurred the distinctions between acoustic and electronic instruments so thoroughly that toward the end the instrumentalists walked off, leaving the synthesizer player to produce all the necessary sound. (Even the keyboardist, Julie Steinberg, was expendable: when she left the stage, the synthesizer kept playing.)

The concerto concert on Sunday evening began with the completed portion of the Concertino for violin and 14 instruments that Donald Martino was composing for this festival when he died last year. It amounted to only 90 seconds of music, but it was fully scored and included energetic, fleet violin writing, played here with virtuosic flair by Yuki Numata, and rich-hued orchestral scoring, led by John Harbison.

It was heartbreaking to hear such a promising start cut off midsentence, but other Martino works — a few of the assertive, freewheeling "Fantasies and Impromptus" (1981) for solo piano, and the "Three Sad Songs" (1997) for viola and piano — were a full reminder of the emotional intensity with which he composed.

On Sunday the Concertino fragment was followed by Milton Babbitt's gentle Duo (1981), offered as a memorial, and then it was back to concertos. Katherine Whyte, a soprano, sang Johannes Maria Staud's "Vielleicht Zunächst Wirklich Nur" ("Perhaps Soon Truly Only," 1999), a set of vignettes that treats the voice almost instrumentally (and sometimes microtonally). Another of Mr. Staud's works, "Black Moon" (1998), used an unaccompanied bass clarinet (played by Amy Advocat) similarly, if more aggressively, on Saturday morning, giving it both gently bent notes and elephant honks.

Also among the concertos was Poul Ruders's "Psalmodies" (1990), which the guitarist David Starobin played with a gracefulness that was matched by the student players, who often shadowed his solo lines. David Kaplan, a pianist, made a solid case for Hans Abrahamsen's pointillistic Piano Concerto (2000). And Ron Ford's "Versus" (2006) proved an electrifying showpiece for Yevgeny Kutik, a violinist. Its one miscalculation

was its ending, a new-music cliché: the ensemble running its fingers around the rims of drinking glasses as the violinist played on. Mr. Ford's "Brandelli" (2004), a piano trio in 12 short movements, heard on Saturday, made a gentler if more lasting appeal.

Saturday night's string music concert had some finds as well. It opened with Andrew Norman's "Gran Turismo" (2004), a wonderfully variegated, energetic score for eight violins, and ended with "Messagesquise" (1977), a surprisingly accessible, even tonal work for seven cellos (one a soloist) by [Pierre Boulez](#). Between them, Jacob Druckman's String Quartet No. 2 (1966) and Betsy Jolas's "Quatuor V" (1994) explored such similar resources — shimmering chordal timbres, pizzicato percussive effects and turbulence bordering on violence — that it seemed as if Ms. Jolas was offering a commentary on Mr. Druckman's earlier score.

Mr. Asbury was on the podium for Mr. Turnage's festival-closing "Blood on the Floor;" mixed into the large, percussion-heavy orchestra was a jazz band that included Martin Robertson, the saxophonist; John Parricelli, the guitarist; Dave Carpenter, the bassist, and Peter Erskine, the drummer. In the best jazz tradition, these musicians all took solos, sometimes augmented by orchestral brass and percussionists. The music's roots ran everywhere, from the Copland of "Quiet City" to Frank Zappa's off-kilter zaniness. By turns rambunctious and soulful, this nine-movement suite is raucous and heartfelt. It was far and away the wildest piece of music heard here this week, leaving a listener with the sense that it should have been the festival's starting point, not its final word.