MUSIC REVIEW: House Blend – ‘Gravity and levity for serious times’ at PS21

PS21 events are curated by Elena Siyanko and the House Blend programs are devised by pianist Alan Feinberg.

BY LARRY WALLACH
POSTED ON JUNE 26, 2022

Program:

J.S. Bach: Two Ricercars from “The Musical Offering” (1747)
Charles Wuorinen: Horn Trio (1981)
Paul Lansky: Three Moves for Marimba (1998)
Arnold Schoenberg: Ode to Napoleon (on a poem by Lord Byron) (1942)

Performed by the Ulysses String Quartet, Leelanee Sterrett (horn), Alan Feinberg (piano), Brandon Ilaw (percussion), Eric Huebner (piano), Miranda Cuckson (violin), and David Adam Moore (reciter)

The concert series “House Blend” at PS 21 in Chatham, N.Y., opened their second season on Friday night (June 24). PS 21 events are curated by Elena Siyanko and the House Blend programs are devised by pianist Alan Feinberg, who was on hand to perform the two Bach Ricercars that served as bookends to a program both entertaining and thought-provoking.

The series is characterized by the “blending” of older music (usually Bach) with a modernist classic (in this case Schoenberg) and a selection of more contemporary works. As the most imposing, dramatic work on the program, Schoenberg’s setting of a long poem by Lord Byron provided the center of gravity. A denunciation of tyranny composed in the earlier days of World War II by a Jew who had fled Nazi Germany nine years earlier, the work carries powerful resonances at this moment when a congressional committee is revealing the ways
a would-be dictator in our own country has attempted to establish minority rule in a pattern that echoes those that brought earlier tyrants to power, specifically Napoleon and Hitler. It was particularly poignant to hear it on the day when minority forces in the government removed a fundamental right of women to determine the fate of their own bodies.

Despite these grim political overtones, there were substantial balancing elements to the program. The Bach works are serious and abstract (meaning without external references), even though they were written as a kind of hommage to Frederick the Great: Bach had been invited to the royal court to meet the musical king, who handed him a theme supposedly composed by himself (probably helped by a composer in his employ, Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach) and commanded his famous guest to improvise upon it. The result was the first ricercar (an old name for a fugue) in three voices, which was subsequently written down. It has the character of a keyboard improvisation (of the highest order!) with a loose structure and flowing figures.

According to the story, the king then requested a six-voiced piece on the same theme, a seemingly impossible demand. Bach said that he would need to work that out “on paper” and went home to compose the second ricercar, a work of virtuosic counterpoint (six voices) in a more antique style. Alan Feinberg made no attempt at historically informed performance; rather, he used the resources of the modern piano (dynamic variation, pedal coloration) to reveal the underlying structure of the music. This worked well in the first work but less so in the second, where the piano’s resources served to obscure its complex weave through an over-emphasis on vertical harmony. This work needs the clarity of a properly registered organ or a consort of viols to reveal its secrets. There is a remarkable transcription by Anton Webern (student of Schoenberg) that uses all the color resources of a modern orchestra to demonstrate the jewel-like intricacy of this astonishing composition.

The three 20th-century works bookended by Bach made use of various forms of humor to shape their character. The trio by Charles Wuorinen (1938-2020), scored for a rare combination of violin, horn, and piano, has a great antecedent by Brahms and a powerful almost contemporaneous companion by Gyorgy Ligeti, the latter having been performed last year at PS 21 by the same musicians. The challenge of composing for this combination is to bring together instruments of vastly different character and sonority to form a coherent body of sound. Brahms did it through skillful use of warmly blended romantic harmonies, while Wuorinen and Ligeti both exploit the contrasts inherent in the instruments, at times to comic effect. *Portrait of Schoenberg by Egon Schiele.*
Wuorinen’s music is known for its atonality, uncompromisingly powerful gestures, and seriously worked-out structures. This piece offers a contrast. It is in a single movement with episodes of clearly marked character. The dynamic is the struggle of these instruments to find common ground: they begin trying to articulate the same note, but their diverse ways of doing so quickly causes the texture to fly off as if subject to centrifugal forces. A high-energy form of organized chaos follows, at times comic or threatening (or both), and at times attempting to find a rapprochement, including a section that sounds like an attempted waltz, and a clear repeat of the opening. Then, after a series of failed attempts, the trio arrives at a fragile agreement to end.

Paul Lansky (b. 1944) is known as a pioneering composer of computer-generated music, but in more recent years has focused on music for acoustic instruments. Judging from “Three Moves,” he seems to have decided to have fun while doing so. The “Moves” are scored for a large five-octave marimba which requires the performer to move lightly on their feet to reach all the registers (my guess is that the instrument is about nine feet long). This requires that the performer either have several music stands available or play entirely from memory, which was the choice of the virtuosic Brandon Ilaw. In a sense, the music choreographs the ‘moves’ of the performer, both the footwork, and the action of the arms and hands, each of which holds two mallets at varying angles throughout. The visual spectacle was enhanced by the different colors of the four mallet-heads that traced graceful arcs in space during the course of the three pieces. The music was light, jazzy, syncopated, clever, and full of delightful surprises, all of which were reinforced by the fun that Ilaw was visibly having throughout.

After providing these imaginative forms of entertainment, the program moved on to Byron and Schoenberg’s sarcasm-laced “Ode” — a work of unmitigated Schadenfreude celebrating Napoleon’s renunciation of power in 1814 and his subsequent (though short-lived) exile to Elba. Schoenberg set Byron’s sneering verses (19 stanzas) to a form of recitation called Sprechstimme (‘speaking voice’) which he had invented thirty years earlier for his masterpiece Pierrot Lunaire in which the speaker’s voice glides from note to note without actually singing them (i.e. sustaining them). The rhythm of the words is fully determined and coordinated with the accompanying ensemble of string quartet and piano, but the inflections are only approximately indicated by the height of the notes relative to a central single-lined staff. The result sounds a good deal like the kind of old-fashioned political oratory or in pulpit rhetoric, a tradition that has been kept alive in some Black churches. The poem is read straight through at a normal reciting speed, much faster than traditional singing can afford, which requires perfect diction. David Adam Moore came close, but a slightly fuzzy sound system left some gaps in comprehensibility. (The words need to emerge through some very dense and active musical textures.) The poem compares Napoleon’s fall to classical and historical examples of kings and tyrants who either gave up their power, always to Napoleon’s detriment: “Since he, miscalled the Morningstar, Nor man nor fiend hath fallen so far...” etc.
While Schoenberg’s music has been negatively stereotyped as gritty and grim, this is a score full of contrasts of character and mood, including much subtle imagery. Unusually for a late work of this composer, the fearsome “twelve-tone” technique is leavened by fleeting references to more traditional harmonies, including a triumphant final E-flat major triad which can be taken as a prediction of the allied victory to come. The score even includes the motto of Beethoven’s Fifth which was a universally recognized symbol of “V for victory”. In addition to this provision of common ground between traditional and innovative music languages, the score contains a spectrum of musical gestures from intimate and mysterious string harmonics to forceful collaboration between the quartet and piano to create a virtually orchestral sonority. The performers did a fine job in wringing all the dramatic juice from this great score.

Schoenberg spent the last 18 years of his life living in Hollywood, teaching at UCLA, and forming part of a community of exiled artists who had fled Europe before the onslaught of the Nazis, including Stravinsky, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, and many others. While there, he was befriended by Charlie Chaplin who, in 1941, was having a huge success with his film “The Great Dictator.” Chaplin came to regret taking a light-hearted approach to portraying Hitler after the full extent of the horrors of the Holocaust came to light at the end of the war. It is plausible that Schoenberg may have had similar reservations about the tone that he adopted in ostensibly addressing Hitler. After the war, he composed “A Survivor from Warsaw” which takes a much grimmer documentary approach to portraying the fate of the European Jews, and finds solace in their adherence to their faith, indicated by his setting, in Hebrew, of the “Sh’ma Yisroel” sung by the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto. In moving from parody to serious indictment, Schoenberg might be offering us a way forward as we address our contemporary situation. Perhaps we should reverse a famous dictum of Marx: “History happens twice, first as farce, then as tragedy.”