

Breaking With Tradition



Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny

I RECENTLY WENT to a concert featuring all original music composed by Russell Steinberg, an accomplished composer and conductor with a Ph.D. in music from Harvard University. This concert presented the world premiere of many of Steinberg's compositions.

The work was brilliantly brought to life by extraordinary musicians including violinists and cellists of the esteemed Los Angeles Philharmonic and a world music trio called Many Axes.

The instruments used by Many Axes range from the most primitive to traditional ethnic and from copies of ancient instruments to original creations. This trio created music entirely on unique instruments such as conch shells, didgeridoos and boom whackers. One of their original creations was a bass frame drum with marbles and balls whirling around inside.

World music mixes Western and non-Western instruments and this concert showcased standard classical orchestral musicians creating music with a contemporary world music ensemble.

You may ask: What kind of music is this? Well, this is considered contemporary classical music. Yes, this does sound like quite the oxymoron, doesn't it?

Let me give you an overview of contemporary classical music. Obviously, contemporary music is any music being written in the present day. Contemporary classical music is music being written in the present day with its foundation rooted in classical music, be that Western or Eastern classical. In this context, contemporary applies to music written from about 1975 to the present. But such music can be even more limiting to include only living composers and their work.

The evolution of contemporary music through the 20th century saw move-

ments such as modernism, the twelve tone technique, atonality and futurism to movements such as nationalism, socialist realism, neoclassicism and serialism. Then came electronic music that includes computer music, synthesizers, mixed media, performance art and fluxus. Since then, there has been minimal music and it goes on and on.

Wow! What does this all mean?

MUSICAL MOVEMENTS

Honestly, it is too much to wrap our heads around in this column alone, so I will try to give you the premise on which these movements are built. For starters, if you understand the literal definitions of the above-mentioned titles, then you can surely surmise what was happening to music at these times. Of course, there is much debate on how, what and when to name these musical movements, and just as these categorizations are vague and contradictory, so are the distinct sounds of the music of these particular movements.

The bottom line is that everything must evolve to stay alive. Music, in general, has always adapted to social influences. Maybe the new movements were sparked by a rebellion against adhering to the strict classical music score.

The study of music theory is based on the structure of how classical music is composed. There are definite rules when composing in the Western classical style. But contemporary classical music breaks these rules while still carrying the traits of the theoretical structure behind classical composition. For instance, to compose for a string quartet in a contemporary way, the composer still needs to know how to compose classically as when the string quartet had its inception. This brings out the distinctive sound quality of the string quartet.

Contemporary classical music has since become a fusion of many movements. In my opinion, we are in the era of "anything goes." Contemporary classical even allows for scientific influences and the combination of genres of music. Maybe a marriage between Beethoven and The Beatles?

Within this "anything goes" policy, I feel the structure of contemporary art forms is mainly born of an "impetus." Most contemporary classical composers have an absolute personal inspiration to go along with the chosen theoretical structure behind their work. Just as a doctor may choose his or her specialty, so does a contemporary composer choose what technique he or she may want to use. In studying composers who have gone before them, con-

temporary classical composers may find themselves influenced by many different techniques while also inventing their own along the way.

When you think of contemporary classical music, you may think of dissonant, non-melodic sounds that are not pleasing to the ear. I must tell you, contemporary classical music has been some of the most beautiful music I have ever heard. I have also heard some that downright hurt my ears. Frankly, with those not-so-accessible works, it all goes back to respecting the education, technique, revelation ▀



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

MUSICAL DON: Italian composer Gian Carlo Menotti with Italian actress Claudia Cardinale in June 2002 in Spoleto during the Festival dei Due Mondi (Two Worlds Festival). Menotti, who was 95, died in February 2007 in Monte Carlo.

◆ and ingenuity that goes into creating this music.

The best way to demonstrate these concepts is to let the composer speak for himself. Steinberg's concert was called "Strange Attractors." According to the program, "Strange Attractors" is a term for the Chaos Theory that suggests a hidden order to turbulent events. I have to say that when I first read that, I felt like I was in for an ear-splitting evening, but I was very pleasantly surprised.

STRANGE ATTRACTION

Now going back to "impetus," Steinberg also went on to say this in his program notes: "This piece marks a new direction in my music that shows my 'strange attraction' to unusual sonority and improvisation created within a structured musical articulation".

Some of Steinberg's other works were inspired by the artistry and/or personal lives of his colleagues. And there you have the "inspiration." Steinberg also said, " 'Strange Attractors' in my piece are represented on several scales: the polarity of standard notion and chaotic improvisation, Western and non-Western tuning, clear pulse, free rhythm, etc. These polarities battle it out, so to speak, so in two contrasting ensembles: a classical string quartet, with

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all the control that it implies, and a world music trio of limitless instrumental resources, unconfined by traditional tunings or musical structures.

The basic premise is that the string quartet and world music trio clash and interchange natures: the trio becomes more structured and the quartet becomes chaotic and improvisatory." And finally, there you have the classical and theoretical "technique," the "ingenuity."

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to perform some contemporary



Composer Russell Steinberg



OVAL HONOR: President George W. Bush with opera composer Carlisle Floyd, left, and choreographer Twyla Tharp during the presentation of the 2004 National Humanities Medal and National Medal of the Arts awards at the Oval Office.

SUGGESTED LISTENING FOR 20TH CENTURY CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

- "Little Women," Mark Adamo.
- "Dead Man Walking," Jake Heggie.
- "Susannah" (my personal favorite) "Cold Sassy Tree" and "Of Mice and Men," Carlisle Floyd.
- "The Medium" and "The Consul," Gian Carlo Menotti.

INSTRUMENTAL

- "The Cave" and "Different Trains," Steve Reich.
- "Heroes" symphony and "Music in the Shape of a Square," Philip Glass.
- "Troubled Water," Margaret Bonds.

CHORAL

- "Eleanor Roosevelt," Libby Larsen.
- "Chichester Psalms," Leonard Bernstein.

classical music and it was a unique experience, to say the least. I can tell you that the notes on the page sometimes do not look like a traditional music score. There are notations in a contemporary score which artists who are strictly taught how to read a classical score must learn. Also, contemporary classical composers sometimes will not use their instruments or the voice in traditional ways.

As a vocalist, I have had to make vocalisms outside the realm of my operatic singing, for example, creating a whispered vocal tone or a high shrill sound that would make the operatic community cringe. Still, much of the singing in contemporary classical music adheres to a beautiful, classical style.

NONTRADITIONAL WAYS

Here are other examples. In a contemporary classical performance, I have seen a piano being plucked instead of played – that is, a musician stands over an open piano and plucks the strings inside the piano; that is surely not traditional. I have also seen a violinist moving the bow up and down the fingerboard of the instrument to create an eerie shrieking sound.

So when a composer notates these indications for a musician to interpret, they are not standard and often times the composers themselves must coach the performer on interpreting the piece. This is why many composers actually conduct their own works in performance.

I have also seen composers place musicians on a stage in nontraditional ways to enhance the sonic nuance of a piece. For instance, say, a string quartet is playing. The viola player may be sitting far left on a stage and the cellist standing in the back of the stage and maybe the violinist is even walking around while playing or playing from the rear of the concert hall!

Many times in contemporary classical music, there also exists the use of improvisation. The composer's score may encompass a framework and the musicians will improvise musically within that framework. The possibilities are endless. These composers tend to be experimental and they utilize textures.

There are only a handful of contemporary classical music composers who are extremely lucrative. Usually they fall into the category of pop songwriters and well-known film score composers.

So, as you can see, the popularity of contem-



porary classical music is not all that high. We all know the popularity of an art form comes down to money, marketing and accessibility and even in the age of contemporary music, classical music struggles to survive. Sometimes, an art form must die to be reborn.

We will always enjoy the “oldies, but goodies” when it comes to classical music, but I urge you to open your minds to contemporary classical. There are many companies around the world that specialize in putting on productions of contemporary works, they just need more of an audience.

I encourage musicians and composers to write new music: new operas, new symphonic works, new choral works, and to just get their music out into the world. You never know who is listening and you may just ignite a new era.

Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny is the quintessential artist. She lives in a paradoxical state of contemporary classical by being a classical singer, actor and teacher in this age of YouTube and reality TV ... of course, all the while pursuing her endeavors with ambitious ingenuity.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE:
Joshua Bell rehearses against the background of Leonard Bernstein before the 44th Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles in February 2002. Bernstein is considered one of the greatest contemporary classical music exponents.

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