

MUSIC REVIEW

Classical Traditions Kept and Upended



Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

The cellist Madeleine Shapiro and the dancer Celesta Haraszti at Symphony Space on Wednesday night.

By BERNARD HOLLAND

American composers, unlike most of the people who play their music, have no trade union to protect their interests and promote their work. What they do have is organizations like the American Composers Alliance. Aaron Copland helped found it in 1937, and today it serves more than 200 members. Originally the alliance was to protect publishing rights and in general persuade the public that writing classical music was a legitimate profession.

It also puts on an annual festival in New York, and this year's began on Wednesday night in the Leonard Nimoy Thalia at Symphony Space. The concerts run every evening through tomorrow, with two free ones tomorrow afternoon. They include 30 composers and 15 premieres, with memorials in particular to Miriam Gideon and Robert Helps. The Ensemble Pi is providing a lot of the performers.

Wednesday's program reintroduces

The festival for the American Composers Alliance continues tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 2 and 8 p.m. at Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway, at 95th Street; (212) 864-5400.

duced contemporary music as a polyglot culture, torn between continuing tradition and abandoning it altogether. Elizabeth Bell's highly literate piano music was an example of continuation. Her "Arecibo Sonata," in a first-rate performance by Max Lifchitz, offered icy chords as introductions to busy figuration, and dance movement with a hint of a French accent. The harmony masks its essential tonality. Dissonance predominates, but just beneath the

At a benefit for composers, challenges to orthodoxy.

surface you feel the homing instinct of traditional ways of hearing.

The most interesting, and by far the most elaborate, display of experimentation was Burton Beerman's "Still, Small Voice": a multimedia field day of opportunities. Celesta Haraszti danced. Madeleine Shapiro played the cello. And geared in response were Mr. Beerman's computer-generated sounds: an entertaining vocabulary of explosions, indus-

American Music Festival 2006 Symphony Space

trial shrieks and whistles and mimicked human voices. Commenting on all these were projections on a screen behind the performers.

Frederick Tillis's "Spiritual Fantasy Suite" has spirituals as a base but its soprano and alto saxophones mixed with piano exude Middle Eastern melody with jazz. What anchors the piece is its eccentric meters and rhythm and the intricate imitative counterpoint. Jan Gilbert's "Shakuntala" pushed even farther east with Nancy Ogle singing Sanskrit texts and Nirmala Rajasekar stroking and plucking the strings of the veena both against the dronelike background of the Sirius String Quartet.

Julie Goodale was the strong soloist in Allan Blank's discursive Music for Solo Viola. Hubert Howe's Chamber Concerto No. 3, at the end, was two movements for 12 players, both moved in slow-paced chord progressions marked by delayed attacks and swelling surges of tone; Marc Danz Williams conducted.

Tim Ruedeman and Paul Coher were the evening's saxophonists. Christopher Oldfather was the pianist.