

S.F. Finale For Wuorinen In New Music

By Robert Commanday
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Saturday in the Old First Church, Charles Wuorinen had his last huzzah here, New and Unusual Music Series-wise.

In the past four years as the San Francisco Symphony's new music adviser and composer-in-residence, he has made a good contribution. The programs he directed covered a wide range of music. His selections reflected no significant prejudice and were about equally divided between works that one would and would not feel a real desire to hear again.

Applying that division to Saturday's program, "U.S./U.K.: Atlantic Crossings," the four pieces fell neatly into the two categories. Song groups for soprano and instrumental octet, John Harbison's "Mirabai Songs" and Jonathan Harvey's "Song Offerings," were appealing, graceful and sensuous, and what the composer was saying was clear enough right off. There did not seem additional substance waiting to be plumbed.

Musical Blend

The marimba, for example, fully covered the others in the first of Harbison's songs. However, the composer son was avowedly seeking a blend of varicolored instrumental fabric to support the exotic/erotic character of these six texts. They are poems to Krishna, the Dark One, written by Mirabai, a woman of 16th century India. She sang and danced them in the streets in an ecstatic personal funerary ritual for her husband.

Harbison's style has softened considerably in recent years. Here the music is chordal, the articulation gentle, the textures rich, not contrapuntal. Often the rhythm turns asymmetrical with lilting syncopation, suggesting her dance.

Everything supports a liquid lyric line that soprano Carol Webber sang in mellifluous fashion. She has a lovely, true-focused voice that floats easily, a graceful presentation.

Webber was interpretively sympathetic, also, in the "Song Offerings" (Gitanjali) by British composer Jonathan Harvey. They are settings of four imagist prose verses by the contemporary Rabindranath Tagore, also ecstatic, though musically more distinctive one from the

other than Harbison's.

Leif Bjaland, the Symphony's assistant conductor, led the ensembles in both song groups expertly.

More Intriguing Works

As immediately attractive as were both Harbison's and Harvey's, the two piano works were more intriguing and long-lasting. Excluded, however, because of formlessness and indirection, would be the first of the "Three Studies for Solo Piano" by young British composer George Benjamin, titled "Fantasy on Iambic Rhythm."

Benjamin's second piece, "Meditation on Haydn's Name," was literally that, the music fastened around

one five-note chord cluster. The title of "Relativity Rag" makes one expect a Tom Lehrer song, but this is, instead, a thoroughly ingenious play on ragtime ideas. Robin Sutherland performed Benjamin's pieces splendidly.

Wuorinen began the evening himself, playing his Bagatelle for piano: a quiet, meditative work, alternating between a chordal style and a contrapuntal right-hand/left-hand duo. Of all his works, it is the least energetic rhythmically, least intense and dissonant. Interesting that he should make this serene study the last selection from his works he would offer audiences here of his own choice, but it did suit the temper of the program.