

MUSIC

Two Meaningful Pieces

Charles Wuorinen's Archaeopteryx and Lucia Dlugoszewski's Cicada Terrible Freedom suggest that atonality is by no means a dead issue.

By Leighton Kerner

The other shoe, promised for last week, finally drops.

Having set down in general terms why most of the tradition-bound audience for classical music has trouble connecting with modern atonal pieces—the absence of clearly perceived popular roots—I thought it useful to get down to specifics and describe some recent music that suggests atonality is far from a dead issue.

1. Charles Wuorinen's *Archaeopteryx*, the world premiere of which at the Caramoor Festival last month was the peg of this discussion, works on more than one level. Composed in 1978 as a virtuosity-demanding chamber concerto for the classical and jazz bass trombonist David Taylor, it also stands as one of the less thorny examples of Wuorinen's fastidiousness in designing and balancing intricately related figures in a musical carpet. Furthermore, it is an engagingly witty work from a composer one tends to classify as "serious" and subclassify as "unbending" and "down-right Calvinist." The wit, however, is an established feature of Wuorinen's musical personality for those reasonably familiar with his output over the years, especially recent years, during which the composer seems to have felt less compelled to feed as

much mental activity into his scores as they would bear. The wit begins with the rather wry title, which is the name of a prehistoric bird with reptilian characteristics. Indeed, the trombone solos, and those of the other 10 musicians, often soar to the top of their ranges and skitter down and around again. The bass trombone, in fact, seems to aspire to the heights more than any of the other instruments, although its range precludes much success. Yet the slitherings and grunts down below are amusingly persistent, especially when set off by assorted stutterings and yelpings in the higher voices. The piece's close is particularly satisfying: the 10 supporting players pound out a rich, wide, nearly consonant chord 12 times, to which the bass trombone responds by starting a quick diatonic dance on a C-B-G motif and then traces a soft three-octave arc on F-sharp, concurred in by various other players, but not the marimbist, who raps out a C and thus sneaks in the good old academic tritone. It only remains to say that the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble played with consistent poise alongside Taylor and under Wuorinen's direction, and in the rest of the otherwise conventional program, Barbara Allen was a scintillating harpist in



Blake: doing Dlugoszewski right

Ravel's Introduction and Allegro, and Alan Cox a luminous-toned flutist in Gounod's Little Symphony for Winds.

2. Lucia Dlugoszewski's *Cicada Terrible Freedom*, all but one of whose five movements were performed earlier in the year by For the Love of Music at Merkin Concert Hall, was played complete for the first time this past spring at Carnegie Recital Hall by a chamber ensemble conducted by Braxton Blake. The story is that Blake heard the incomplete premiere and resolved then and there to assemble specialists in this composer's uniquely demanding music. (For the Love et cetera, for all their fine qualities, are not, as a group, in that special category.) Those specialists

included Mr. Taylor, violinists Linda Quan and Evan Paris, cellist Chris Finkel, contrabassist Lew Paer, flutist Susan Palma, and the composer at what she long ago christened the "timbre-piano"—an instrument prepared far more variously than John Cage's Brand X. The new work's title is meant to suggest, without undue specificity, the vulnerability, mortality, and brave independence of the cicada. Most of Dlugoszewski's music, however, suggests those qualities—in human situations as well as elsewhere. Her music is always structurally cohesive, no matter how spontaneous-sounding the content, but the combination of free-form appearance and firm compositional plan is especially striking in this big, substantial (more than half-hour) piece. As with much of her music, there is a hot, high-speed sound-world here, in which composition, performance, and listening seem to take place within a pressure cooker. Yet, *Cicada Terrible Freedom* is much more than a high-energy experience. It also sings and soars with a clear, softly lit lyricism—yes, atonal—not often associated with Dlugoszewski. When one thinks back, however, to some of her music (*Angels of the Inmost Heaven*, or the trumpet solos in *Abyss and Caress*), one remembers the astonishing transparencies of her writing for muted brass in highest ranges with softest dynamics and how trumpets could be heard as violins. To put things very baldly, the new piece is built on a succession of gradual intensifications followed by sudden drops in dynamics, instrumental densities, and pitches, and there is a wider structure that dramatically varies the five movements. But the listener really comes away from this music with a sense of having experienced a new song as well as having been exhilarated once again by Dlugoszewski's daemonically dancing and fulminating instruments. The Carnegie Recital Hall performance never failed in either respect. And the question of whether atonal music can reach an audience never even came up.