

CHARLES WUORINEN

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MUSICAL EVENTS

Intuitions

I wasn't able to get to the Parnassus concert and am writing about it on the strength of a very clear tape I borrowed from the ensemble. Picker's Octet was preceded by a poised and yet passionate account of Varèse's "Octandre." A trenchant performance; special praise for the oboe, Gerard Reuter. The concert ended with Charles Wuorinen's "The Winds," composed for Parnassus in 1977 and here receiving its second performance. This is a brilliant, animated stretch of music, lasting fifteen minutes. The forces are five woodwinds (flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon), three brasses

(trumpet, trombone, tuba), and piano. A repeated-note signal recurs to define the structure; some episodes are whirling, some lyrical. There is exuberance both in the invention of incidents and in the scoring, which makes striking use of different combinations, of timbre contrasts when a note moves from instrument to instrument, and of lines moving in and out of unisons. Perhaps Picker found some ideas here.

The prolific Wuorinen is in good form, and December was not only Carter month but also a Wuorinen month in New York. Besides "The Winds," and the Second Piano Sonata (a Bicentennial piece, which Jeffrey Swann played in Carnegie Recital Hall), there were two premières. First, the American Composers Orchestra, under Dennis Russell Davies, played Wuorinen's Two-Part Symphony, in Alice Tully Hall. This is a neoclassical composition; in a program note, the composer suggested that he might have called it "Symphony in C" or "Short Symphony" had not those titles already been used by Stravinsky

and Copland. Stravinskian the piece certainly is, but with a difference, for, like "The Winds," it is twelve-note music with an emphatic tonic—E-flat in "The Winds," C in the symphony. Wuorinen says that he "had a very good time writing it;" and people will have a good time listening to it. (The performance was recorded by CRI.) Nevertheless, it struck me as being one of Wuorinen's larger but not one of his "major" or most intensely imagined compositions. In the last few years, I have heard more new works by Wuorinen than by anyone else, and have been bored by only one of them (the piano duet "Making Ends Meet"—and that may have been the performers' fault). He brims with lively ideas. He effortlessly commands—and combines—a diversity of techniques. A big, generous creativity pours through even the overschematic channels he sometimes devises.

The second Wuorinen première was of "Archangel," a short piece (about twelve minutes) for bass trombone with string quartet, played at a Group for Contemporary Music concert up at the Manhattan School. It's a severe, concentrated work with apocalyptic overtones, opening with noble, lyrical declamation. Toward the end, the trombone, muted, grows hoarse—more dark angel than archangel—and finally it sounds those pedal tones that Messiaen has made into a symbol of abyss. The work was commissioned by David Taylor, who played it most tellingly. Wuorinen is already well represented on disc. If I had to pick three more works to illustrate in small space and as vividly as possible the variety of his achievement, they might be the sombre "Archangel," the glittering "Arabia Felix," and the high-spirited "On Alligators."

Andrew Porter
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