

New Music at Merkin Hall

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NEW YORK – For 33 seasons, the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society has balanced established and emerging composers on its artfully assembled programs. Co-directed by NYU composition professors Lou Karchin and (the now-emeritus) Brian Fennelly, the group can take credit for 200 world and local premieres, as performed by a fluid ensemble of some of this city’s finest free-lance new-music interpreters. It is a congenial, collegial group, with an *esprit des corps* rarely seen in larger and/or permanent ensembles. Such was the mood on both sides of the footlights at the Society’s April 7 “Spring Splendor” performance in Merkin Concert Hall, a venue whose intimacy is ideally suited to such programming.

The central curiosity was the premiere of “Assimilations” by Robert Sirota, who somehow manages to maintain an active composing career while simultaneously being president of the Manhattan School of Music. A convert to Christianity some 23 years ago, Sirota in “Assimilations” meditates appealingly on his Jewish heritage, cultural assimilation and collective memory. “Psychologically, my bags are always packed,” he quips in his program note. With traditional Jewish folk melodies as his prominent motivic material, Sirota creates a neo-tonal landscape that recalls the music of Copland, Bernstein and David Diamond among other Jewish American composers who dealt with cultural assimilation and religious identity. Clarinetist Alan Kay, whose playing adopted a number of inflections from Klezmer music, brought beautiful tone and an adroit sense of style to the proceedings.

Though created as homage to Robert Schumann’s “Blumenstücke,” Fabio Grasso’s “blumentraum” -- for piano solo or piano solo with flute, violin and cello “ad libitum” -- actually channels a more Impressionist musical language, with shimmering washes of scalar passages, lush chords and a supple rhythmic ebb and flow. The physical score is daunting to look at, its graphic notation, cutaway-style layout and snatches of aleatory pointing to a formidable challenge, met with seemingly effortless fluidity by Stephen Gosling.

Laurie San Martin’s Two Pieces for Piano and Percussion showcases the piano as a percussion instrument. Although a decade separates the pieces, “Fragments” (2010) and “Bone Dance” (2000) share materials. The later work seemingly nests a number of motives that are more thoroughly examined in the earlier, including flurrying arpeggios and insistent passages of repeated notes. Pianist Blair McMillen and percussionist Matthew Gold were a deft pair, ricocheting complex lines between piano and pitched percussion with clarity.

Two of the works on the program called for larger forces than WSCMS' usual format. Richard Festinger's "Concerto for Piano and Nine Instruments" (2007) gave Gosling virtuosic passagework aplenty, but also ample opportunities for lyricism. In the first movement, widely spaced chords "sink in," some creating moments of repose, others pregnant with anticipation, all counterbalanced by brilliant ensemble passages. Other instruments pick up where the piano leaves off, sustaining lines that have begun to decay. It's a neat trick that creates a kind of antiphonal echo. The second movement is more compact, distilling the first-movement material into a fast-paced, dramatically hefty finale. It's a courageous composer who creates such an intricate labyrinth of associations, but the audience stayed with the piece throughout its myriad twists and turns.

Lou Karchin conducted the premiere of his three-movement Chamber Symphony (2009); it's a form closely associated with the works by Arnold Schoenberg, which Karchin clearly acknowledges. The work is a pleasing postmodern hybrid, with all manner of imaginative doublings among the 14 instrumentalists to draw a wide palette of colors. It bravura trumpet and horn calls were handled with panache by Sycil Mathai and Adam Krauthamer.