10-25-1998

Currents: Odd American Music. Music From the Odd Decades: Teens, 30s, 70s, 90s.

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CURRENTS
the New-Music Ensemble in Residence at the University of Richmond

Fred Cohen  Artistic Director

presents
Odd American Music.  
Music from the Odd Decades: Teens, 30s, 70s, 90s.

October 25, 1998
Camp Concert Hall, Booker Hall of Music, University of Richmond
3:00 pm
Free and Open
Program

At the River (1916)  
Serenity (1919)  
The Things Our Fathers Loved (1911)  

Charles Ives (1874-1954)

Density 21.5 (1936)  

Edgard Varèse (1883-1965)

13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird (1979)  

Lukas Foss (b. 1922)

Scratchband (1997)  

John Adams (b. 1947)

Program Notes

In the early part of this century, concert music in American was largely dominated by European models and standards. American composers, from Chadwick to MacDowell, were sent to Europe to study and sharpen their compositional skills.

Though he played seminal role in the history of the development of American music, Charles Ives occupies a curious position in music history. He is widely acknowledged to be one of the first American composers to break out of the European mold, yet Ives worked in near total isolation from both the public and other musicians during the early years of the century.
The vocal works from the teen years demonstrate Ives's mature style. His music retains a traditional tonality, one not in vogue during those turbulent years. However, Ives viewed tonality as one of a number of possible systems for ordering music:

Why tonality as such should be thrown out for good, I can't see. Why it should be always present, I can't see. It depends, it seems to me, a good deal--as clothes depend on the thermometer--on what one is trying to do, and on the state of mind, the time of day or other accidents of life.

The melody of At the River is taken from a well-known hymn tune by Robert Lowery and provides a lovely example of one of Ives's most characteristic techniques: musical quotation. Here Ives borrows the entire melody, although more commonly he quotes only fragments from well-known tunes, and frequently mixes these together in complex, multileveled textures. An example of his ability to combine and reshape musical fragments can be heard in the opening measure of The Things Our Fathers Loved. The voice begins by quoting the opening of Dixie, but shortly alludes to the first phrase of My Old Kentucky Home. Each of these fragments is repeated in different transpositions and treated with a syncopated rhythm. Indeed, the entire vocal line is patched together from isolated fragments from borrowed tunes.

Edgard Varèse was born in Paris. His early studies emphasized mathematics and science, and at the age of 18 he began to study composition with Albert Roussel and Vincent d'Indy. Varèse emigrated to the United States in 1915 and began to organize music societies in New York City.

Density 21.5 was commissioned in 1937 by Georges Barrere for his inaugural concert on a new platinum flute (the density of platinum is 21.5). The work was revised in 1946. Density 21.5 is composed in three contiguous sections; the first and last are lyric, while the middle is more percussive, or "event" oriented.

Many timbral explorations are heard in Density 21.5. Most timbral features on the flute are exploited: range differences, dynamics within the various registers, and articulations (including "key clicks"). The motive (F-E-F#) is clearly stated in the first phrase of the work. There are constant references to the motive throughout the piece. Numerical relationships with the title may be important in Density 21.5. Seventy of the first 83 intervals are seconds, fifths (or their inversions, fourths), or primes (1). The musical language used, however separated from a tonal sphere, is articulate and consistent. Varèse belongs to that group of American experimental composers intent on creating a new syntax from rich vocabularies of sound.

Lukas Foss has written more than 120 compositions. He has been the Music Director of the Buffalo, Milwaukee, Brooklyn and Jerusalem Philharmonics, and Professor of Music at UCLA and SUNY Buffalo. Foss writes the following about 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird:

Wallace Steven's poem 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird is perhaps the most frequently set to music of all American poems. To some composers it may suggest variations on a theme. But what attracted me is the combination of humor, mystery and above all, imagery. Perhaps a poem suggests 'music' to the extent that it is 'visual'....I decided to write the piece for soprano or mezzo-soprano, for a distant but visible flutist representing the blackbird, for a pianist playing on the keyboard as well as inside the piano (à la Autoharp) and for a percussionist playing almost exclusively on the piano strings with triangle beaters, cowbells and Japanese bowls...Some listeners find this hard to believe, but there are no electronics in the piece....

John Adams's Scratchband exemplifies several trends in Adams's current music: an increased number of works for small groups, an emphasis on virtuosity, and the reappearance of rhythms and sonorities associated with minimalism. Writes the composer,

The instrumentation of Scratchband is that of a hybrid rock band. With the use of electric guitar, electric bass, drum set, amplified winds and synthesizers, the timbres and style of orchestration make it a close sibling to the pit band of Ceiling/Sky, the 1995 song play I composed in collaboration with June Jordan and Peter Sellars....For listeners familiar with my recent music, Scratchband will probably appear as a strange shotgun wedding, one that marries the busy, terrier-like activity of the Chamber Symphony to the pop timbres of Ceiling/Sky score...[But] what strikes me about the piece is the way in which minimalist gestures are beginning to reappear in my music after a significant absence.
13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

poem by Wallace Stevens

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

The black bird whirled in the autumn
winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman
Are one.

I do not know which to prefer
The beauty of infections
Or the beauty of innuendoes
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro,
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in the green light.

Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

The river is moving
The blackbird must be flying.

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbirds sat
In the cedar-limbs.

About CURRENTS:
Now in its twelfth year, CURRENTS is the only professional contemporary music ensemble in Virginia. Founded by Fred Cohen in 1986, CURRENTS performs each year at a variety of locations in the central Virginia area. CURRENTS made its New York debut at the Katherine Bache Miller Theater in 1993 and its debut on the Virginia Museum’s Fast/Forward series during the 1994-95 season. CURRENTS first CD was issued in December, 1995, on the Centaur Label (Centaur CRC 2248), and its second CD in March, 1997. Plans for the 1998-99 season include a program of musical expressionism featuring Schoenberg’s classic Pierrot lunaire, a program of delightful contemporary chamber and vocal works to accompany the Designed for Delight exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Nov. 15, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Auditorium), the East coast premiere of James MacMillan’s Raising Sparks and the world premiere of Rand Steiger’s Vectors (Feb. 24, Camp Concert Hall, University of Richmond), and an evening of original and recent musical Haiku (in conjunction with the Haiku Society of American National Meeting, March 19, Camp Concert Hall, University of Richmond).