

NEW YORK CONCERT REVIEW

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Proteus Ensemble and Hai-Ting Chinn, mezzo-soprano

Le Poisson Rouge

October 25, 2009

This was my first visit to Le Poisson Rouge, a multimedia art cabaret which has become the hip and trendy place to hear classical music in New York. The audience sat at tables and could eat and drink before, during and after the performance. Fortunately one heard very little table noise, and the wait-staff was quite discrete. I might add that the mac and cheese was delicious.

Soon after the piped-in-classical-background-music stopped, the five members of the Proteus Ensemble entered and flutist Jennifer Grim played “Syrinx,” Debussy’s work for solo flute. This segued into a performance of pianist James Johnston’s fine arrangement of Debussy’s “Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune.” Both pieces were beautifully done, and while pride of place goes to the flutist in both of these works, I was very impressed by the perfect intonation and beautiful balance one heard in the octave doublings played by Ms. Grim, clarinetist Gilad Harel, violinist Yuko Naito, and cellist Alberto Parrini. But, as we were not given programs, no one in the audience was informed as to what was being played or by whom.

Next, appearing hip and trendy in high boots and a mini-dress, mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn performed Poulenc’s song cycle “La courte paille.” These seven songs, settings of nonsense verses for children, were initially written for the soprano Denise Duval to sing to her son. For me, a little French whimsy goes a long way. But the audience delighted in Ms. Chinn expertly poised performance, for which James Johnston provided the sensitive accompaniment. Computer keystrokes by Ms. Chinn activated text translations which were projected on a screen behind the players.

Alban Berg’s “Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano” followed. Here one experienced some of this evening most memorable playing. The almost inaudible pianissimo phrases spun out by Mr. Harel were ravishingly beautiful, perfectly shaped and controlled.

Then came the evening’s major work, Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire.” The Proteus Ensemble’s makeup exactly matches the instrumentation of this 1912 expressionistic work. They performed the complex score masterfully, playing with such ease and assurance that it belied the fact that this was atonal Schoenberg, not Mozart. The same could be said for Ms. Chinn’s performance of the *Sprechstimme* (speech-voice) narration. There are many ways to perform “Pierrot’s” *Sprechstimme*, some more sung, some more spoken. Ms. Chinn “more sung” rendition was quite convincing.

Immediately after the performers left the stage, the piped-in-classical-background-music began again.

-Harry Saltzman



Beauty and the Beast: South Berkshire Concerts present Schoenberg, Debussy, Ravel, and Poulenc The Proteus Ensemble, Hai-Ting Chinn, Mezzo-Soprano

Posted by Seth Lachterman
The Berkshire Review for the Arts
October 29, 2009

Claude Debussy: *Syrinx*, *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* (arranged by James Johnston) Francis Poulenc: *Le Courte paille*_Maurice Ravel: *Sonata for Violin and Cello*_Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, opus 21

Proteus Ensemble: Jennifer Grim, flute, piccolo; Gilad Harel, clarinet, bass-clarinet; Yuko Naito, violin; James Johnston, piano_Hai-Ting Chinn, mezzo-soprano (Poulenc and Schoenberg)

Perhaps no concert this past year could match the flavor, color, and daring of last night's recital at Simon's Rock College. Compositions of such wizardry, virtuosic harmonic construction – and deconstruction – are gauntlets thrown down for none but the most capable artists. Surely, the Proteus Ensemble and mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn – forces of impeccable musicianship and intelligence – met the challenge, and provided huddled spectators who braved some awful weather an unforgettable evening. It's hard to imagine that the ineluctably disorienting *Pierrot Lunaire*, Arnold Schoenberg's expressionistic nocturnal pre-Halloween thriller, could be so light, airy, and, might I say, appealing. But when you have performers as gifted as these, it's hard to not be beguiled – even by the occasionally hyperbolic imagery in the poetry. The fragrant melodic fragments scuttled around in Schoenberg's score were breezy playthings in the assured hands of the musicians, and Ms. Chinn's grasp and seemingly effortless vocal élan.

The concert's first half allowed the tonal side of harmonic invention to state their case: irresistible and colorful French works fattened us up for the kill later in the second half. The evening opened with flutist Jennifer Grim playing *Syrinx*, a flute solo, by Claude Debussy. An insinuating and chromatic head motif comes, goes, and returns with improvisatory flourishes in its path. A strong case can be made of Wagner's influence here, as Debussy's work bears some striking similarities to the English horn solo of *Tristan's Act III*. Ms Grim's technique was flawless and her tone was bright, focused, yet warm. The work segued immediately to the opening solo of Debussy's most famous work, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. James Johnston's chamber reduction of Debussy's orchestra adequately captured the highly nuanced harmonic and coloristic palette. The piano took on the important role of harps, lower strings in tremolo, and generously completed the harmonies suggested by the four remaining soloists.

No music could qualify better as ear candy than the guilty pleasures of Francis Poulenc's works. With the childlike insouciance of Maurice Carême's text, coupled with Poulenc's suave, sensually tinted harmonies and irresistible Gallic wit, the song cycle *La Courte paille* (The Short Straw), was a perfect baffle for the dark side in the second half. The last song of the set, "Lune d'Avril," a child's prayer to the moon, was an



especial irony before the Schoenberg. Ms Chinn and Mr Johnston conveyed just the right irony of the playful, saccharine texts bathed in Poulenc's luxuriance.

Yuko Naito, violin, and Alberto Parrini, cello, were heard in Maurice Ravel's sinewy Sonata for Violin and Cello (1922), which the composer dedicated to the memory of Debussy. While it might be an apostrophe to Ravel's impressionist predecessor, its angular lines and Bartók-like effects and dissonance are clearly statements of musical independence by Ravel. Only in the second movement, *Très vif*, do we hear echoes of Ravel's turn-of-the-century masterpiece, the F-Major Quartet. Ms Naito and Mr Parrini, well-matched in string color, played to the work's virtuosity and thrilling intensity.

Pierrot Lunaire, its recondite exterior notwithstanding, is actually a work of wit, albeit a dark and expressionistic one. The gothic Symbolist poetry of Albert Giraud's *Pierrot lunaire: rondels bergamasques*, translated by Otto Erich Hartleben, is a phantasmagorical sendoff of the revered poetic symbols of antiquity. The Rondel, a fourteenth-century poetic verse form, is a variation of another form, the Rondeau. The form, one used for "lighter" verse, is intentionally repetitious and sing-songy with a mere two alternating end-rhymes. Giraud truncates this form, somewhat like Swinburne, whose revival of these French forms in the late nineteenth-century was extremely influential. Historical poetic symbols of the color red (the rose, passion, Christ's blood), the color white (chastity, virginity, death), and the moon ("The White Goddess," the creative spirit, the eternal feminine, the mystical and sexual) are deconstructed by commedia dell'arte characters who serve up the most bizarre grotesqueries and ironies. Hartleben's Germanification only intensified these shadow shows, stressing the saturnine and alienating implications of life, love, and religious devotion. With his transparent instrumentation Schoenberg gives the verses moth-wings, tendrils, and surreal garments. However, above all, he demands much from the human voice who must deliver the text in Schoenberg's unique vocal idiom, *Sprechstimme* ("speech-voicing"), a combination of pitched notes and near microtonal inflections within those pitches. The effect is to galvanize the musical-arioso to the service of the word itself rather than for any purely musical or structural purpose. The technique, in itself, is an additional irony to the verse form, which stresses tunefulness and repetition. A virtuoso vocalist is required here who, as well, has a firm grasp of vocal theatre. Ms Chinn made each song something to behold. Her colorations, from the dark-hued and husky to the flutelike, conveyed the ever-changing capriciousness and coy equivocation of this work. Her striking stage presence, her breathtaking mastery of the frequently caustic vocalizations, and her interpretive insight into vivid Symbolist prosody placed her visionary reading at the top of a half-century of performances. Those who have heard this work from the LP days with Bethany Beardslee, or more recently, with the late, great Jan DeGaetani, knew that Schoenberg's early twentieth-century *bête-noir* was never sung better than tonight.



Bringing quality chamber music to the UBS Atrium*Proteus Ensemble to perform latest HRPAC lunchtime concert*

Jim Hague

Reporter staff writer

Jim Johnston is one of many people who truly believe that classical music is becoming more popular than ever. "Concert audiences are always changing," said Johnston, who plays the piano for the highly acclaimed Proteus Ensemble that will perform Wednesday in the latest of the UBS Atrium Series of free lunchtime concerts produced by the Hudson Riverfront Performing Arts Center (HRPAC). The concert is set to begin at the UBS Financial Services headquarters in Weehawken at 12:30 p.m.

"The music industry is always in a state of flux and it's in a particular state of flux right now with all the different styles of music," Johnston said. "But for chamber music, intimate settings are always the best. I think chamber music is made for that setting and the interaction you have with the audience. I think we're introducing our music to a variety of people and I think more and more people are becoming interested."

The Proteus Ensemble, which takes its name from the Greek prophet god who was capable of assuming many forms, brings a fresh perspective to a wide variety of musical forms from the distant past to the present day.

"We create a whole different style out of the chamber repertoire," Johnston said. "We formed about a broad of a range as you can find. We get asked all the time about the name and I think that's the reason.

We're never the same. We're just hoping to be memorable."

Unique sounds

With its winds, strings and keyboard instruments, the Proteus Ensemble draws on its inherent diversity to create eclectic, yet coherent programs that include the classics of the standard repertoire and the many currents of recent music. The quintet often divides into smaller combinations allowing it to perform an even wider variety of repertoire that includes quartets, trios, duos, and solos.

"We can do duos and solos very easily to showcase a particular member," Johnston said. "It adds to the variety of the program."

The Proteus Ensemble will perform what they call, "Americans in Paris," featuring the works of American composers George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, both of whom spent time learning their craft in France.

The group does their own arrangements of orchestral work, music that was created for as many as 13 instruments that is now compacted and arranged down to five instruments.

"There's something to be gained by it," said Johnston, who is joined by Alberto Carrini on the cello, Yuko Naito on the violin, Jennifer Grim on the flute and Gilad Harel on the clarinet. "It's a lot of work, but a lot of fun, doing different arrangements of different music."

The group was formed while they were all studying classical music.

"The flutist, Jennifer, and I actually met at Yale eight years ago," Johnston said. "We put the group together and found Yuko, who is another Yale grad. We played together at Aspen for three years and that was great. We've just evolved since then."

Noted performers

The Proteus Ensemble is one of the country's most respected mixed ensembles. After winning top prizes at Chamber Music Yellow Springs and the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, the quintet made its New York debut to a sold-out audience at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall.

Since then, Proteus has been in demand for concerts and master classes across the country, including their three-year stint as the Aspen Music Festival's Contemporary Ensemble. Recent performance highlights include the ensemble's Lincoln Center debut as part of the Great Performers Series, the Celebrity Series in St. George, Utah, and the British Art Museum at Yale University.

"We've been exploring a wide range of music for our performances," Johnston said. "We've been performing at a variety of different places, like concert halls, but even churches, house concerts, wineries. I think the smaller settings are great. We want to try to bring younger people to the audiences. We

love playing the older music, but we need to have the variety to attract the

younger audiences as well. But any time classical music can get

attention, I think we all benefit from it."



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Proteus 5 a talented chamber ensemble

By JEFF JOHNSON
Past and Current Reviewer

Thursday, the Piccolo Spotlight Chamber Music Series featured the Proteus 5 Chamber Players, five young specialists in modern chamber music.

Consisting of Jennifer Grim (flute), Yuko Naito (violin), James Johnson (piano), Aron Zelkowitz (cello) and Carol McGonnell (clarinet), the Proteus 5 use an odd combination of instruments favored by many modern composers over the traditional quartet and quintet groupings. In the superb acoustics of First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, these talented musicians were able to create overwhelming and multilayered patterns of sound that kept the

REVIEW

large audience enthralled.

Michael Torke's "The Yellow Pages" (1985) is an impressionistic sound rendering of both the color yellow and the more mundane experience of using "the yellow pages" of the standard telephone book. While the other musicians built patterns of chords to a climax, the clarinet and the flute warbled melodic phrases in a charming way.

Aron Zelkowitz began Robert Baksa's "Cello Sonata" (1980) with a long, winding melodic line which exploited the full beauty of the cello's sound. Sounding completely original, Baksa's cello sonata is firmly in the grand romantic tradition with beautiful themes and dra-

matic musical high points. For the Allegro and Adagio movements, Johnson's piano part was primarily there to support Zelkowitz's virtuosity on the cello. But in the final Allegro, the piano did have moments of musical dominance which allowed the audience to hear how well he played.

Johnson's special arrangement of a section of Bach's "Musical Offering" was the curiosity of the concert. Given the odd instrumentation, the piece did not sound as if it were by Bach; however, it did not sound exactly modern. The Proteus 5 Chamber Players did play it extremely well, and the final effect was unsettling.

Bela Bartok's "Contrasts for Violin, Clarinet and Piano"

(1938), and Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, No. 1, arranged by Anton Webern for violin, flute, clarinet, cello and piano (1922-1923) are perfect ensemble pieces for the Proteus 5 Chamber Players. The final "Sebes" section of the Bartok Contrasts seemed to have every sound ever heard on a cartoon soundtrack, ending the piece on an upbeat.

Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony is complicated with overlapping fragments of melody, but was played in a manner that gave the piece a good deal of delicacy.

The Proteus 5 Chamber Players received a standing ovation and hopefully will be returning to future festivals, promoting modern music.

Presenter Reports

SEPTEMBER 2004

PROTEUS

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Stacia Sue Gabriel, Outreach Coordinator (503/392-
4741)

C:3 T:4 M:3 Out:4 Att:4 Aud:3 Con:4

Comments: The concert program was varied and included works by Torke, Beethoven, Ades, Villa-Lobos, and Arnold Schoenberg. Each of the pieces was performed with freshness, vitality, and skill. Proteus performers also did ten outreach programs in a variety of venues (schools, homes, clubs). The performers interacted well with their audiences and successfully communicated their love and enthusiasm for twentieth century music.

Was this presentation meant to challenge your audience? Somewhat

How satisfied were you with the number of people who attended? Very Much



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8th ANNIVERSARY SEASON

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Proteus 5

Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall
February 17, 2001

Founded in 1996, Proteus 5 is one of the newest ensembles in the northeastern U.S. to perform contemporary music. "Contemporary music" might be misleading, however, for although this young group's repertoire seems to primarily comprise music composed in the 20th century, they also take pride in performing a number of classics from the Western cultivated tradition, extending as far back as Monteverdi. They also present their own arrangements of both Western and non-Western musics. Adding to the eclecticism, the group frequently divides itself into smaller chamber ensembles, which allows it to perform quartets, trios, duets, and solos.

Proteus 5 comprises Jennifer Grim (flute), David Griffiths (clarinet), Yuko Naito (violin), Raman Ramakrishnan (violin/cello), and James Johnston (piano). Because all of the evening's pieces were performed extremely well, both the positive and (very minor) negative attributes to be found in one piece's performance are largely the same as those found in performances of the other pieces.

First of all, this group clearly has chops. The technical proficiency exhibited was of the very first order, and I clearly got the impression that these people can play anything. The only slightly negative attribute exhibited by their playing is one that is almost a corollary of being young, technically accomplished, and fast: the slower sections could generally have been played a little slower. This youthful group sometimes seemed to be in a hurry to get to the next note, the next phrase, the next section.

The first piece performed was Mr. Johnston's realization of Webern's arrangement of the final ricercar from Bach's *The Musical Offering*. Bach did not specify instrumentation, but Webern's 1935 arrangement is for orchestra; however, Mr. Johnston's realization for Proteus 5's instrumentation also proved effective.

The second piece was *Bird as Prophet* (for violin and piano), by Martin Bresnick. Once again the instrumentalists played extremely well, although (again) the slow sections could have been even slower, for my taste. The performance of the microtonal section near the beginning of the piece was well done, and the piano chords near the end of the piece were played sensitively by Mr. Johnston. The faster and louder sections, on the other hand, may have exhibited a bit too much mechanical bombast.

David Rakowski was the third composer performed, and I found his

"Proteus 5" continued...

After the intermission, Proteus 5 opened with Charles Griffin's *Perturbations*, for flute, clarinet, and cello. This is another piece that calls for virtuosi, and once again Proteus 5 delivered the goods. This composition's rhythmic vitality, together with its heavy emphasis on a sense of inexorable forward motion, helped to again highlight this ensemble's particular strengths.

The works of two different Schoenbergs closed the evening's performance: Melanie Schoenberg's *Harmony and Malady*, and Arnold Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony #1, Op. 9. Ms. Schoenberg's work was not pleasant, nor was it intended to be. Both she and Proteus 5 succeeded admirably in conveying the narrative included in her program notes: "*Harmony and Malady* was inspired by an illness.... During the experience I became more aware of my breathing patterns, and this piece is, to a certain extent, a musical response to that awareness.... The piece aims to convey the sense of hopelessness in the face of natural forces often felt to be beyond one's control." Ms. Schoenberg's use of microtonality was effective, and the piece certainly did convey a sense of inevitability, hopelessness, and the feeling that the music itself was "breathing in and out." In addition to this metaphorical (almost onomatopoeic) "breathing" quality, the back-and-forth aspect helped to build tension and to amplify a sense of delayed resolution.

Arnold Schoenberg's *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9 (for fifteen instruments) closed the program (tonight's performance was Anton Webern's arrangement of the piece). The program notes speak of "the piece's frenetic harmonic rhythm and sweeping gestures [which] speak both to the past and the future, creating a unique and explosive power that is only with the greatest difficulty held together by traditional means." In fact, the piece doesn't "hold together" at all. The

piece to be the most satisfying of the evening, Rakowski - who has served on the faculties of Stanford, Columbia, and Harvard Universities, and who received his training at the New England Conservatory, Princeton University, and with Luciano Berio at Tanglewood - is one of the best younger composers today (his *Persistent Memory* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize). The work performed by Proteus 5 was *Attitude Problem*, a piano trio that comprises three movements performed without pause. The "attitude problem" consists of conflicts in rhythm (i.e., between the harmonic rhythm and the "traffic and anxious surface gestures," in the first movement), pulse units (between piano and strings, in the second movement), and articulation and rhythm (between the "flowing notes in a rhythm of 3 and staccato notes in a rhythm of 2," during the third movement). The second movement is hauntingly austere (although, once again, if it had been performed more slowly it would have proven even more effective). In the third movement, however, Proteus 5 was truly able to shine, as one might have guessed from Rakowski's performance instruction: "The tempo of this movement should always be as fast as possible, and as steady as possible." Metrically, the movement alternates at blinding speed, between 12/16, 9/16, 15/16, 18/16, and 21/16, with the exception of eight measures of 4/4 time toward the end of the movement, which nicely prepare the listener for the final bars of the piece, in which the dynamics are suddenly piano (helping to provide a striking and satisfying conclusion).

Michael Torke's *Yellow Pages* was up next. (As an example of the catholic tastes of this group, it replaced the piece printed on the program: Eric Dolphy's *Hat and Beard*, another realization of Mr. Johnston's.) *Yellow Pages* is great fun. This is an exuberant process piece, composed in 1985, when Torke was a student at Yale. And it certainly sounds youthful: a joyous, minimalist-influenced work that truly rocks. *Yellow Pages* comprises a short, repeating phrase that slowly modulates from key to key by means of adding sharps, one by one, to the pitches of the phrase. The ensemble clearly enjoyed playing this piece, and, unlike some minimalist pieces, it had the advantage of being nearly as much fun to listen to as I'm sure it was enjoyable to play. There is some particularly nice writing for the clarinet, which was, of course, performed very well by Mr. Griffiths (in fact, I repeatedly noted throughout the evening that he is particularly adept at exploiting his instrument's chalumeau register). Finally, *Yellow Pages* has a very charming conclusion.

continued next page

overwhelming impression of this superbly performed work was one of impotence. I couldn't shake the feeling that Schoenberg was frantically casting about, "grasping for straws," and failing to accomplish what he wished. Nonetheless, Proteus 5 performed the piece extremely well (undoubtedly it is more fun to play than listen to). Schoenberg's writing is polished, but - although I tried to empathize with the dated, turn-of-the-century European aesthetics of *Kammersymphonie* - in this piece, at least, the composer's experience and intelligence only succeed in conveying failure. It is perhaps possible, of course, that Schoenberg was, perhaps subconsciously, attempting to convey the idea that he was lost in an exhausted compositional approach that could not adequately "tell his story." If so, then he succeeded. Otherwise, his granddaughter perhaps more completely fulfilled her own more modest aspirations with the evening's penultimate performance.

What is left to say about Proteus 5? The level of technical proficiency among performers of contemporary music in the New York metropolitan area keeps increasing: like athletes who continuously break previous records, more and more instrumentalists keep surpassing their musical forebears. In general, the members of Proteus 5 play as well as the members of any of the best contemporary ensembles. Two things, however, set Proteus 5 apart: 1) their eclectic and inspired programming, and 2) the sheer joy they exhibit during performance. Refreshingly, these musicians display none of the elitist attitudes one sometimes still finds among performers of cultivated music. Their love of playing is communicated to the audience, without reservation or apology, thereby obviating the illusory need for tiresome condescension. *Artist's International* has another winner with Proteus 5.

David Thomson

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