

# 'And on parasol . . .'

The John Cage retrospective at Alice Tully Hall last Sunday featured the American premiere of his latest work "Cheap Imitation," an orchestra piece, notated in completely conventional notation. It is based fairly literally on the melody of Satie's "Socrate," but Cage has orchestrated it according to chance procedures, so that the tone color constantly fluctuates from one unpredictable



*John Cage retrospective:  
Robert Levy at the  
Composers' Theatre:  
Laura Greenberg at  
the Kitchen (Johnson)  
Jessye Norman concert  
(Kerner)*

combination of instruments to another. A phrase may begin as a guitar solo, then shift to piano and plucked violin, and end up in marimba and bass clarinet. This Klangfarbenmelodie technique has been used frequently in contemporary music, but never quite so literally for quite such a long time. Cage's attractive new piece proceeds in a relaxed manner, with almost no dynamic contrast, for perhaps half an hour. It is not very exciting, but it has a lovely

quality and can be quite enjoyable if one is in the mood to just sit and listen to the colors change.

Cage's early works were represented by Music for Wind Instruments (1938), a three-movement piece with constantly shifting meters. It is nominally serial, and the organization of rhythms and intervals is more cerebral here than in any Cage work I know.

Twenty-seven Feet, 10.554 Inches for a Percussionist (1956) was interpreted by Roy Pennington and Gordon Gottlieb, employing a door bell, vocal sounds, an electronic hum, cowbells, and a radio tuned to a jazz station, not to mention all the standard percussion equipment. As you might imagine, it was an amusing rendering of the piece.

The well known Concert for Piano and Orchestra (1957-58) featured Max Lifchitz, who played the solo piano part in a relatively conventional way, only once standing up to drum on the piano strings and make some noises with a music stand. Most of the time the focus was on the members of the small orchestra, each of whom had brought his own bag of tricks. They squawked on their mouthpieces, shouted, tore paper, made sounds with a parasol, rattled a paper bag, and dropped things from time to time. One of the string players even went so far as to put his instrument down and begin sawing on a piece of wood with a real saw. The conductor in this piece is simply a timekeeper, and Peter Maxwell Davies played his role quite seriously, making a big circle with his hands every

minute, just like a second hand.

The performance of the Piano Concert, like that of the percussion piece, was genuinely amusing from time to time, and I certainly cannot say that it is wrong to approach these pieces in this way. Cage's aesthetic is related to Dada, in a way, and certainly Cage himself has done his share of clowning around. But I have the feeling that, by now, there should be more interesting ways to interpret these open-ended works.

**THE COMPOSERS' Theatre** featured Robert Levy as trumpet soloist in a concert of six pieces on January 17. David Cope's new work "Bright Angel" is an effective piece for trumpet and tape. The soloist begins with sustained tones which are echoed by far-away trumpet sounds recorded on the tape. As the piece progresses, the texture thickens, the recorded trumpets sometimes playing thick chords or scrambly textures. A clear sense of dialogue between performer and tape is maintained throughout, and the piece is almost theatrical. Who is this trumpet player, and who are

*Continued on next page*

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# music

Continued from preceding page these distant trumpets that respond to him?

John Watts's "Elegy to Chimney: In Memoriam" is also a good piece. Here the trumpet is joined by an Arp synthesizer and recorded electronic sounds. I had heard the piece once before, at the New School auditorium, where I became engaged primarily with quadrophonic effects. Here, in the much smaller space of the Greenwich Mews Theatre, the trumpet and electronic sounds blended together much more. They create a rich, almost sensual texture, which tends to gravitate toward one pitch.

Donald Erb's "Diversion for Two" is an amusing little piece for trumpet and percussion. It contains a great deal of virtuoso playing, but mostly just as a means of setting up gags. The trumpet player makes a funny

kissing sound in his mouthpiece, the percussionist does a few well-timed tricks with a slide whistle, and so on.

The remaining pieces by Allan Blank, Morgan Powell, and George Andrix were all for unaccompanied trumpet, and they all seemed tedious to me. Nothing is quite so blatant as an unaccompanied trumpet solo, and I find it difficult to remain engaged with the medium for more than a few minutes, regardless of how many different kinds of mutes are employed.

LAURA GREENBERG'S program at the Kitchen on January 15 included three pieces. Duet for Voice and Synthesizer combines a dense texture of familiar synthesizer sounds with a few uninspired and badly recorded voice sounds. "Thanksgiving Music" is a tape collage of children talking, American Indian chants, and other types of music. Many of the fragments Greenberg selected were good, but I could not see that her collage did much to enhance them.

"Rock Wood Ice Fire and Air" is an attempt to make music using only these five basic substances, but Greenberg did not stay within the restrictions she set for herself. Jim Burton played "wood" by making sounds on wood and cardboard. Garrett List interpreted "rock" by making sounds with rocks and wood. Fran Page was supposed to represent

"air," but her modern dance improvisation had nothing to do with air, as far as I could see.

Bob Stearns executed "fire" and "ice" by turning a blowtorch on a large block of ice. The reflections of the torch through the ice were beautiful to watch, and the triumphant moment when the flame finally ate its way through the 10-inch block of ice was almost beautiful enough to make the whole evening worthwhile. But of course, the sound of a blowtorch has nothing to do with either fire or ice. It was all rather confusing.

—Tom Johnson

JESSYE NORMAN, a 27-year-old black soprano from Georgia, took a detour from her accustomed European circuit of opera houses and concert halls to give her first New York recital last Sunday night at Tully Hall. After her big success last summer singing Wagner with Colin Davis and the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood, you can't say that Lincoln Center was taking much of a risk in introducing her to New York on its "Great Performers" series, but it's nice to acknowledge that this strongest of establishment bastions sometimes does something right.

Miss Norman, in a program consisting of songs by Brahms, Wolf, Satie, Richard Strauss, Wagner, and Mahler, definitely strengthened the impression of warmth, intelligence, musicality, and humanity she created at Tanglewood. It's true that the opening Brahms group began less than well. "Wie Melodien zieht es mir" came up against a vocal constriction that belied the musical flow of the song, as well as the sense of the words. But things quickly improved, and the same composer's "Von ewiger Liebe" was given with a slowly revealed passion that commanded every heart to be melted. The Wolf song ("Aug ein altes Bild") describing a painting of Madonna and Jesus with a background of trees, one of which is destined to be the cross of Calvary, was sustained on a quiet sadness, and "In dem Scatten meinen Locken" was all gentleness and love, without the coy and cutesy "sophistication" some singers think the song needs to survive. And Wolf's "Geh Geliebter, geh jetzt" had a deep, intense urgency about it that reduced by comparison the similar situation in the nightingale-lark dialogue of Romeo and Juliet to childish games.

The Satie songs are wonderful rarities. They include his "Trois Melodies," of which the punning of "Dapheneo" has a funny, dribbling musical line under it and "Le Chapelier" ("The Mad Hatter") clothes the story of a watch-greased to make it fun faster, with music that had mock-passion of nearly Wagnerian intensity. Strauss's "Befreit," Wagner's "Schmerzen" and "Traeume," and Mahler's "Liebst du um Schoenheit" all found Miss Norman deeply involved with music and text and engaging what might be the most chameleonic smile on any stage today, capable of expressing in turn triumph, half-disguised grief, slyness, and sheer joy.

John Wustman, that prince of accompanists, was at the piano and held to his high standards all the way.

And once again, the management of Tully Hall seemed to be in league with Saturday Review, publisher of the program book, to boost business for optometrists and oculists. The type used for the text (English only, and often abridged, with no original words and no naming of the poets) would be hard to read in proper light because of its extremely faint and small type face. But Tully Hall, along with most of New York's

halls, keeps the lights almost out in the audience area. The house manager Sunday night said the singer and her manager wanted it that way. The singer said later backstage, "Somebody's kidding you. Why bother to print the texts if they can't be read?" Her manager said, "We asked for normal concert lighting." This last may have been the stumbling block, letting the hall off the hook, but aren't house managers allowed the discretion of using a little common sense and double-checking the on-the-spot results, especially in view of Saturday Review's absolutely inept approach to publishing program books?

This complaint was long overdue in this column, and since Andrew Porter has promised a full brief of complaint in the New Yorker, I defer to him, with the option of following up with anything he might leave unsaid. However, I doubt he will leave anything worth saying unsaid.

—Leighton Kerner

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