

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Mon, Mar. 10, 2008

Daring project offers takes on war

BY LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON

Project Copernicus is still only an occasional presence on the local scene, with its most recent program taking place in August 2007.

Still, conductor Chung Park and composer Stephen Danyew have served up thoughtful, unorthodox programming that has provided a spark to Miami's nascent contemporary music community.

Saturday night in Miami Beach, the mutable chamber ensemble offered its most venturesome effort to date. Presented by Arts at St. Johns, the program marked the fifth anniversary of the start of the Iraq War and offered Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* and the premiere of Danyew's *Letters from Iraq* in collaboration with the acting troupe Ground Up & Rising.

The theatrical approach was made clear immediately with a performance of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, as the Ground Up actors, clad in military uniforms, marched to the front of the St. John's church and raised an American flag, setting the scene for Danyew's new work.

Letters from Iraq takes its inspiration from four missives sent by fallen soldiers to their families back home, each read by an actor with the spoken text overlapping the start of each musical section. The moods are varied: A young female soldier writes to her mother relating her excitement at learning how to drive a tank, painted in quick, bustling wind lines and cheerful energy, the vehicle suggested in motoric rhythms.

The ensuing letters grow more somber. A soldier tells of a comrade who gives his weekly candy bar to a young Iraqi girl in an effort to calm her and stop her tears, reflected in soothing repetitions, a child-like delicacy and rising violin solos, nicely played by Jamecyn Morey, the music closing on a note of ambivalent solace.

In the third letter, a soldier tells of a colleague's funeral and begins to question the war's rationale. The final setting is the most openly emotional, in which a soldier writes a message to each of his children and a heartfelt statement of love to his wife, with music that is warmly lyrical, closing *Letters from Iraq* in a mood of richly elevated transcendence.

Actors Rachel Chin, Arnaldo Carmouze and José Antonio Paredes brought youthful vigor and feeling to their readings, though Reiss Gaspard's overly vehement delivery of the final text somewhat undercut the tenderness of the words.

Scored for the same septet forces as the Stravinsky, Danyew's music is attractive, unabashedly tonal and, at times, startlingly beautiful. There's a kind of homespun American naiveté that suits the innocence and honest eloquence of the soldiers' words.

Yet at times, particularly in the last two sections, the shadows of Aaron Copland and John Williams (*Saving Private Ryan*, especially) hover near as the trumpet-led themes rise in growing waves. If not the most individual of Danyew's works, the music is undeniably well crafted and communicative and

was given sterling advocacy by the Copernicus musicians under Park's sensitive conducting.

The high-energy actors took a much more active role in the ensuing performance of Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat (A Soldier's Tale)*. Written at the end of World War I, Stravinsky's music-theater hybrid calls for actors and narrator as well as musical septet to relate the tale of an army deserter who sells his violin to the devil for a book that predicts the future.

The Russian folk fantasy has been updated over the years with countless contemporary spins, and Ground Up & Rising's unapologetically revisionist take is in the same tradition.

There are modern retoolings, most notably the soldier exchanging his fiddle for an iBook laptop, as well as clever one-liners replete with topical references (Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey) and funny moments from Carlos Alayeto as the quick-change narrator and Luckner Bruno Jr. as an over-the-top devil in many guises.

L'Histoire can stand a lot of free interpretation, but the improvisations often got far away from the text and tended to override the story's subtle symbolism and antiwar focus.

Stravinsky's astringent bone-rattling music -- 90 years after its premiere -- came across as the most radical and jarringly subversive element. Park led a masterful performance with superbly cutting violin solos by Blake Espy, and equally polished and rhythmically incisive playing by clarinetist Raymond Santos, bassoonist Renee DeBoer, trumpeter Jason Covey, trombonist Timothy Higgins, bassist Jory Herman and percussionist Rod Squance.

© 2008 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>