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Lou Harrison Feted in D.C.

By Brett Campbell
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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The shimmering, seductive sounds of the Javanese gamelan beguiled American composer Lou Harrison (1917-2003) from the first time he heard them, in 1939 at San Francisco's Golden Gate Exposition. Harrison [Musical America's 2002 Composer of the Year] composed dozens of works for gamelan beginning in the mid-1970s, and often called its sound the most beautiful on the planet.

The Post-Classical Ensemble, of which Joseph Horowitz is artistic director, recently presented a mini Harrison festival on the campus of George Washington University, featuring two and one-third of the composer's finest works. By way of introducing Harrison's oeuvre to the uninitiated, a symposium on March 4 at the Indonesian Embassy included a brief demonstration and explanation of traditional Javanese gamelan music, drawing a capacity crowd of more than 200. The event also featured a symposium in which Wesleyan University's gamelan ensemble director and scholar Sumarsam, biographer Bill Alves and Indonesian Ambassador Dino Patti Djalal persuasively distinguished Harrison's sensitive, thoughtful "confluence" of Western and Asian musical forms from "exotic" cultural forms appropriated by commercial interests.

The discussion/demonstration provided nourishing context for the following evening's concert in GWU's Lisner Hall. The Wesleyan gamelan performed Harrison's jubilant "Bubaran Robert," with trumpeter Chris Gekker playing his processional phrases on stage and in different parts of the hall. The gamelan ensemble was sensitive throughout, as it was to former Bang on a Can pianist Lisa Moore on the next piece, the first movement of the composer's brilliant, dramatic 1987 Concerto for Piano and Javanese Gamelan. Horowitz later told me they had decided to omit the other two movements for fear of taxing listeners' stamina, but truncating such a stirring showpiece left the concert's first half feeling imbalanced. (The complete work is available on a splendid new recording by Seattle's Gamelan Pacifica.)

The concert also offered excerpts from longtime Harrison colleague Eva Soltes' new documentary, "Lou Harrison: A World of Music," which had premiered a week earlier at the National Gallery of Art. Seeing and hearing the composer — a pioneer in restoring historical and natural tunings displaced by the severely compromised equal tempered system that conquered Western music at the end of the

19th century — rhapsodize about the importance of tuning and nature (complete with images of his lovely garden) served to connect Harrison's warm, expansive personality to his path-breaking music, which much of the audience was probably hearing for the first time. Other Harrison experts were on hand to provide illuminating insights into the composer's life and work during set changes and in a post-concert discussion.

Horowitz called Harrison's other piano concerto -- for orchestra, written a few months earlier than the gamelan concerto -- "the most formidable concerto for any instrument written by an American composer." Having heard performances featuring Keith Jarrett, Ursula Oppens, and Marino Formenti (with the Los Angeles Philharmonic last year), I can't argue. From the majestic Brahmsian opening to the tart tone clusters and prominent percussion of the piquant "Stampede" and on through the poignant Largo and final movement, P-CE and soloist Benjamin Pasternack delivered a spectacular performance that pushed audience members to the edges of their seats and the pianist several inches above his bench.

Accepting an invitation Harrison noted in the piano part, Pasternack (like Harrison, a long time improvising dance accompanist) improvised a sparkling, searching first-movement cadenza. Charismatic P-CE Music Director Angel Gil Ordonez led a taut, unforgettable reading.

The practicalities inherent in performing the Whitman-esque "Four Strict Songs" helps explain the relative obscurity of much of Harrison's music. The first piano concerto required tuning to the gamelan's intonation; the second specified a tuning devised by one of J.S. Bach's students. "Four Strict Songs" -- set to Harrison's own poetry to celebrate his return to the pastoral beauties of his native West Coast in 1953 after a turbulent decade in New York -- required a third, natural tuning, along with a second re-tuned harp. Financial constraints evidently precluded the availability of either, and harsh dissonances occasionally emerged, somewhat vitiating the impact of a work whose beauty is largely inherent in its tunings.

The GWU Chamber Choir acquitted itself well, but its sound, while attractive, was too thin for the exultant opening song, "Here is Holiness." (This performance used Harrison's later arrangement for mixed chorus rather than the eight baritones he originally specified.) The gentler pastoral movements fared better, with young baritone Andre Lamar Smith lending a fine vocal presence despite his decidedly un-Harrisonian vibrato. Still, the engaging performance, expertly shaped by Gil Ordonez, made a strong case for "Strict Songs" to be in the pantheon of American vocal music.

That the logistical challenges of presenting Harrison's under-performed works — including others that require odd combinations of global instruments or Harrison's own American gamelan — are well worth the effort was proven by the music's insistent allure and the audience's enthusiastic response, arrived at in no small part from P-CE's smart, context-laden approach.

Brett Campbell is the co-author with Bill Alves of a biography in progress on Lou Harrison.

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