

Music both brand new and vintage new

Toronto

The Betty Oliphant Theatre

01/14/2018 -

**Michael Oesterle: *Chamber Concerto***

**Arnold Schoenberg: *Phantasy, Opus 47***

**Alban Berg: *Kammerkonzert***

Duo Diorama: MingHuan Xu (violin), Winston Choi (piano)

New Music Concerts Ensemble, Robert Aitken (director)



W. Choi, M. Xu & ensemble (© Daniel Foley)

The main focus of this concert was Alban Berg's *Kammerkonzert* for violin, piano, and 13 wind instruments. It was composed 1923-25 (just after he had composed *Wozzeck*) and dedicated to his teacher Arnold Schoenberg on the occasion of his 50th birthday. Berg pointed out that it was completed on his 40th birthday, and that their friendship was then 20 years old. The spate of numbers from Berg's lengthy dedicatory letter (printed in the program) leads on to a numerological thicket as he lays out the structure of the three-part work, with 240 bars in both the first and second parts, then 480 bars in the final section. He also managed to use notes to "spell" his and Schoenberg's names, plus that of their colleague Anton Webern. And let's not overlook the 12 notes of the tone row.

Considering all this, one could understandably expect a cold mathematical treatise, but no, there is much richness as well as helpings of the Bergian melancholy (such as we find in his *Violin Concerto*). Berg notes that he has "smuggled" "a world of human and spiritual references" into the piece that adherents of program music "would go mad with joy". He also claims that the aficionados of the various schools of composition of the day - The New Classicists, the Linearists, Physiologists, Counterpointists, Formalists, and the adherents of new Objectivity (*neue Sachlichkeit*) - could also find something in there. The 35-minute work certainly has a lot of content, and the main impression it gives is that the composer was giving vent to an obsession (not an unhealthy one I hasten to add).

Noted pianists have taken the work up (Sviatoslav Richter and Martha Argerich to name two) but work is not at all like a concerto. Despite being largely silent at the start, the violin has by

far the larger part - as well as the last word. MingHuan Xu displayed truly rich, expressive tone in this work and in the other two on the program. (She and pianist Winston Choi perform as Duo Diorama. She is from China, he is from Canada, and they are based in Chicago. She plays a 1758 Nicola Gagliano violin.)

The program opened with the premiere of Toronto composer Michael Oesterle's *Chamber Concerto* for which the composer consciously used the same 15 instruments of the Berg work. It is not as long (19 minutes) nor as mathematical (as far as I could tell). The composer describes it as "an aesthetic struggle between the violinist and pianist" and each at times is accompanied (or reinforced) by a number of the wind instruments. At times the pianist seems to be teased or mocked, and there seems to be a satire on salon music. Like in the Berg work, the violinist gets the last word.

Oesterle's work was followed by Arnold Schoenberg's *Phantasy* for violin and piano dating from 1949, which makes it one of his last works. The piece is singular in that the violin part was composed first and then the piano part added. It does not follow the twelve-tone system. It comes across as a jaunty dialogue between the two instruments, with many abrupt leaps in tone and volume. Given the rigorous nature of so much of Schoenberg's work it comes across as a bit of a romp. It served to bring Ms. Xu and Mr. Choi more into focus; they make an impressive duo.

Over the next few weeks New Music Concerts will be presenting two more concerts featuring works from the second Viennese School (still regarded as "new" apparently) as well as recent commissions.

Michael Johnson

Concertonet.com published January 17, 2018