

MUSIC

Lend Me an Open Ear

Composers find support for new music in Cazenovia

by ANNA REGUERO

"FRESH INK," AN HOUR-LONG RADIO SHOW PRODUCED BY THE SOCIETY FOR NEW MUSIC, AIRS EACH SUNDAY AT 2 P.M. ON WCNY-FM 91.3.

Mili Fernandez stood on the bottom floor of the Cazenovia College Gallery, closed her eyes, and drew the bow of her violin, producing a violent, high pitched shriek. Fernandez, a senior at the University of Michigan, was playing the music of George Rochberg, a contemporary American composer who died last spring. The concert was part of the closing reception this past summer for the Society for New Music's Cazenovia Counterpoint Festival.

This was Fernandez's third season playing for the festival. Before the society approached her to play for the Rising Stars concert, Fernandez had never performed contemporary music.

"I wasn't sure how well I would pull it off because I had never played it before, but I was pleasantly surprised," Fernandez said. "I enjoyed it."

The society's mission is to present opportunities for people of all ages to understand the music of our time using the talent bred in central New York. On Sept. 27, the society will open its 2005-2006 season, marking its 34th year as a presenter of new music.

"It's been a lot of work, but also very rewarding," said Neva Pilgrim, founder of the society. "If we don't help create culture, there won't be culture for our grandkids."

The society was founded in 1971 by Pilgrim, who is also a performing vocalist, in an effort to keep the musical community in central New York vibrant and growing. Starting from five concerts a year, the society has expanded to approximately 25 events each season, including workshops, masterclasses and encounters between composers and inner-city school children.

Nationally recognized for its contributions to new music, the society was a four-time winner of the programming award from



Photo by Robert Carroll

Society for New Music members, from left, are cellist George Macero, violinist Vladimir Pritsker, pianist Steven Heyman, clarinetist John Friedrichs and flutist Linda Greene.

the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers and Chamber Music America, as well as the Laurel Leaf Award from the American Composers Alliance. In 2001 the Society garnered the New York State Governor's Arts Award.

Each year, the society commissions at least one new work by a local composer, and features regional talent alongside nationally recognized guest composers. One measure of the organization's success has been the fact that four of its commissioned composers have gone on to receive the Pulitzer Prize in composition: Richard Wernick (1977), Christopher Rouse (1993), Melinda Wagner (1999) and Steven Stucky (2005).

The 2005-06 season will open with Matthew J. Walton's opera "Sundance," commissioned by the society and premiered this past summer. Other highlights will include work by Sally Lamb, this year's locally commissioned composer, and Patrick Castillo, this year's winner of the Brian M. Israel Prize, an annual award given to a New York State composer under the age of 30. In addition, Pilgrim said that

said she is trying to arrange an appearance by composer Philip Glass, in a joint effort with the Syracuse International Film Festival.

The opera "Sundance" should be of particular local interest as it deals with the travails of Native American tribes. "Sundance" recounts the struggle of Native American activist Leonard Peltier, who was incarcerated after the Pine Ridge Reservation Indians' drawn out struggles with the FBI between 1973 and 1975 in South Dakota that resulted in the death of two agents. Three decades after the shootings, Peltier remains in prison for a crime he contends he didn't commit.

The opera's plot traces the sufferings of Peltier and the Pine Ridge Indians, while the music displays Walton's talent as a vocal composer. In a performance heard last summer, his chorales were skillfully voiced, making the conflict and dissonances embedded in the music sound harmonious. Occasionally, the orchestra's sound was overwhelmed by the rich quality of Walton's vocal writing, perhaps due to the small instrumentation of seven. Overall, the

opera becomes a forum for discussion about the on-going land debates between the American Indians and the government, and opera is an original and satisfying way to take it in.

Another society composer who is paving new roads in music is Lamb, whose commissioned piece, "Subito," a single movement work for violin, cello and piano, will be performed on Jan. 22. "Subito" means "suddenly" in Italian. The title refers to Lamb's technique of using the idea of contrast to cement her composition together.

Lamb's music typically incorporates classical and popular idioms. She describes it as being fairly direct, not abstract.

"I grew up having season tickets to the Detroit Symphony one week, and the next week I'd be at a bluegrass concert," Lamb said. "Those experiences shaped my music."

Lamb won the society's Israel Prize in 1993 while pursuing her doctorate degree at Cornell University. She joined the Syracuse University composition faculty two years ago, and lives in Syracuse with her husband and 4-year-old son.

Ultimately, the society has had an impact on composers, audiences, and on performers as well. When Fernandez picks up her violin to play contemporary music, she finds it to be a fun and exciting change from classical repertoire. She thanks the Society for opening her ears to new music.

"I think it's great," Fernandez said about the Society. "If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have paid attention to modern music." ■

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