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MUSIC REVIEW | WOMEN’S WORK SERIES

Composers of One Sex but Numerous Styles

By ALLAN KOZINN

At the Tanglewood Music Center in recent summers the composition classes have been evenly split between men and women. And out in the world of professional music making, women who compose and whose works are performed are so plentiful that they don’t really need a special series to get their music heard.

Even so, the Women’s Work series at Greenwich House Music School, now in its sixth season, offers a stylistically varied selection of scores from around the world. That they are written by women is the least notable thing about them, and that, in a way, is a measure of the progress women have made in recent decades.

The Wednesday evening installment of the series was devoted to piano music, performed by Jenny Lin, whose specialty is virtuosic contemporary music and who chose works that mostly had in common assertiveness and muscularity.

She began with “Article 1 to 3” (2003), a prismatic score by Rozalie Hirs, from Amsterdam. Ms. Hirs, intent on mining the piano’s vast palette, devoted her first movement to percussive bass figures, her second to pointillistic treble lines and her finale to a cascading elaboration on a figure borrowed from Debussy’s “Feux d’Artifice.”

Debussy was one of several composers on the mind of Gabriela Ortiz from Mexico, when she composed her “Estudios Entre Preludios” (1998): her gentle-voiced, gracefully flowing preludes are homages to Debussy and Takemitsu, and her more fiery, rhythmically pointed and occasionally pugilistic études pay tribute to Bartok and Ligeti.

If the Taiwanese composer Tzu-Ling Sarana Chou kept clear of overt musical influences, her “Quadro Parlante” (2003) was inspired, she wrote in a program note, by Rembrandt’s self-portraits. You have to take her word for that; her language is modern and thorny, and it moves (sometimes by way of sudden shifts) between wildness and restraint.

The other works on the program were by Americans. Laura Kaminsky's “Calendar Music” (2008) is a dozen short movements with energetic, extroverted pieces, quirky tone painting (the bird song in “July,” for example) and ruminative movements interspersed. Ms. Kaminsky wrote these pieces for young, apparently sophisticated students, and the set has an appealing symmetry, with “January” and “December” sharing a choralelike spirit and several internal movements linked as well.
In Laura Schwendinger’s “Air and Buenos Aires,” an opening movement built of arching, angular lines and lovely textures gives way to a harmonically dense movement with tango rhythms deep in its DNA.

Ms. Lin closed the program with two works that incorporate electronic sound. Missy Mazzoli’s “Orizzonte” (2004) puts a richly inventive, outgoing piano line against a series of simple, gently repeating electronic tones.

Julia Wolfe’s “my lips from speaking” (1993) was far more raucous. Originally scored for six pianos, it was heard here in a version for a live piano and five more on tape (recorded by Lisa Moore) — when the tape worked, that is, after an aborted first try. A figure from an Aretha Franklin song (“Think”) supplies the raw material, but Ms. Wolfe fragmented and expanded on it considerably, yielding a vast, often aggressive mountain of sound.

*The next installment of Women’s Work is a program of vocal music with Mary Hurlbut, soprano, on Wednesday at Greenwich House Music School, 46 Barrow Street, West Village; (212) 242-4770, greenwichhouse.org.*