

Spiral Form and Other Compositional Modes of Fred Lerdahl



Kate Glicksberg for The New York Times

Michel Galante conducted Anssi Karttunen, cellist, and members of the Argento Chamber Ensemble at Miller Theater.

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The engaging Composer Portraits series at the Miller Theater has highlighted the work of a wide range of composers, from the up and coming to the legendary. On Friday evening the spotlight was on Fred Lerdahl, a professor at Columbia University.

In an onstage discussion with the composer Robert Sirota, the president of the Manhattan School of Music, Mr. Lerdahl — who came of age amid the stylistic battles of the 1970s — said he “always sought musical forms of my own invention,” trying to match the right form with the right expression. His influences have included Elliott Carter, late Sibelius, early Schoenberg, Bartok and Stravinsky.

In “Time After Time” (2000), which opened the program, Mr. Lerdahl incorporated what he calls a spiral form, in which a simple and stable musical idea is expanded on. The excellent Argento Chamber Ensemble, conducted by Michel Galante, illuminated the intricacies of the kaleidoscopic first movement, with its colorful trills and rapidly descending motifs. The second movement opened on a whisper, whose calm was soon shattered by piercing jolts from the winds. The work concluded on a tranquil note, with a coda recalling thematic fragments from both movements.

Next came the New York premiere of Mr. Lerdahl’s Third String Quartet (2008), given a vigorous performance by the Daedalus Quartet. Mr. Lerdahl calls the string quartet the “most personal and psychological of musical media.” In this one a melodic line in the first violin unfolds over agitated underpinnings in the other strings. Violent mood swings follow lyrical interludes, with the overall musical canvas punctuated by colorful gestures.

The Finnish cellist Anssi Karttunen was the fine soloist in the American premiere of “There and Back Again” (2010), a short work that Mr. Lerdahl composed as a 50th-birthday present for Mr. Karttunen. Inspired by “Chiacona,” a cello piece by the 17th-century composer Giuseppe Colombi, this cleverly constructed work begins with simple octaves, and its material is woven through chromatic, 12-tone and microtonal variations before ending back in the 17th century with Colombi’s melody. During the discussion, Mr. Lerdahl said he had imagined what could be done with the four-bar chaconne form and thought “it would be a fun tour de force” to explore 400 years of music history in four minutes.

Mr. Karttunen joined forces with the Argento musicians and Mr. Galante for the premiere of the expressive “Arches,” for solo cello and large chamber ensemble. Another example of Mr. Lerdahl’s spiral methods of composition, it was inspired by Gothic cathedrals, and the haunting opening cello solo, played against bell-like echoes from the percussion, does indeed evoke an expansive cathedral setting.

The next Composer Portraits concert, devoted to Pierre Boulez, is on Dec. 6 at the Miller Theater, Broadway at 116th Street, Morningside Heights; (212) 854-7799, millertheater.org.

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