

Music review: 'Professor Bad Trip' invades Monday Evening Concerts



January 11, 2011 | 2:45 pm

“Professor Bad Trip” is Fausto Romitelli’s most ecstatic plunge into psychedelia and spectralism. The Doors meet — and unapologetically drown out — Pierre Boulez. Completed in 2000, an Italian composer’s nearly 45-minute confrontation between chaos and control forecast a millennium that no one else was quite ready to acknowledge.

A decade later, we know better, and on Monday Los Angeles’ doors finally opened for this particular professor and his bad trip. With wa-wa-ing electric guitar and all, the West Coast premiere of the full score was the major event of the Argento Chamber Ensemble program at Monday Evening Concerts in the Colburn School’s Zipper Concert Hall.

Romitelli, who was born in 1963, was a curious character on the European new music scene. He somewhat followed in Esa-Pekka Salonen’s footsteps, studying in Milan with Franco Donatoni, then moving on to Boulez’s new music center, IRCAM, in Paris.

Only Romitelli did this five years after Salonen, and by then Donatoni had become musically radicalized and bit wacko. Meanwhile, IRCAM had turned into a hotbed of spectralism, using the science of acoustics and the music research facility’s computers to cook up intoxicating harmonic resonances.

Throw into the mix a professor Timothy Leary leaning toward drugs, mysticism, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the music of the Jim Morrison and the more current club culture, and Romitelli briefly became the rocker of the moderns. And like many of his hipster idols, Romitelli died too early, at 41 (after a long battle with cancer), to complete his vision.

Structured as three “lessons,” “Professor Bad Trip” is Romitelli’s magnum opus but is only now becoming known in America. The San Francisco Contemporary

Music Players gave the first part of the score its U.S. premiere in 2007. Talea played the full piece in June as part of the Bang on a Can marathon held in the atrium of the World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan. But the gripping performance by Argento, another excellent New York group, at Zipper was the first in America in a concert hall.

This is a piece hard to perform, difficult to love and impossible to ignore. Zipper was nearly full, and the sense of anticipation was high. So was the temperature in the hall. Apparently “Professor Bad Trip” requires so much juice that electricity was diverted from the ventilation system.

The scoring is for a fairly normal 10-member ensemble of strings, winds and percussion along electric guitar and electric bass. Cellist Jay Campbell had a spectacular moment in Lesson 2 when he put down his acoustic instrument, took up an electric cello and made like Jimi Hendrix. The pianist had a smaller electric keyboard on top of her grand. Harmonicas and kazoos were part of the mix. And a mix it was. Extensive electronics are required and the hall was surrounded by loudspeakers.

The sound is often distorted and ugly but fascinating, a little reminiscent of the controlled craziness and crazy control of Miles Davis in the '70s. But Romitelli’s grit, especially his rubbing together unearthly spectral harmonies into electronic dirt, was all his own and something to hear.

The first half of the concert was pristine and demonstrated just how good are the members of Argento, which is conducted by Michel Galante. Carol McGonnell was the elastic, exacting, stupendous soloist in Brian Ferneyhough’s highly complicated mini clarinet concerto, “La Chute d’Icare” (The Fall of Icarus). At the other extreme she was a study in soporific eeriness in Salvatore Sciarrino’s clarinet solo “Let Me Die Before I Wake,” a repetitious, unpleasant reflection on euthanasia.

Three tiny pieces by Gérard Pesson with long French titles were alluring. In one — “La Lumière n’a pas de Bras pour nous Porter” (Light Has No Arms With Which to Bear Us) — pianist Joanna Chao rhythmically slapped the keys with only an occasional piano note sounding in the process. This is a fresh and exciting composer all but unknown in the United States. Monday evening was a night of news.

-- Mark Swed

Photo: the Argento Chamber Ensemble at Zipper Concert Hall Monday night. Credit: Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times.