

EPIC NIGHT AT THE PARK AVE ARMORY

Posted by Joel Myers on Monday, February 21, 2011

The Powerless program last Friday night at the Park Avenue Armory was probably the best concert I'll get to go to in 2011. It's also a daunting thing to review – I was commenting to a friend after seeing it that any of these three pieces (if you count the Bach +Reich as one) could easily have been "the main event;" nothing had the feeling of being a supporting character. There was an ambition to the program that seemed almost stubbornly willful, impossibly virtuosic, compulsively huge, and dangerously new. In other words, totally the kind of thing I geek out about.

Haas's *In Vain*



George Friedrich Haas's 70-minute-long *In Vain* started the night off, performed wonderfully by the Argento Chamber Ensemble. The first portion immediately reminded me of Ligeti's *Etude Vertige*, with its repeatedly melting chromatics. Despite being not totally original, the first part was still structurally justified, conveying a sense of the chaos that initiated all things. I personally got the impression of the moment after the Big Bang, that blast of matter, the nascent universe commencing its infinite expansion. The sounds got more chaotic, and then, after not too long, the whole space plunged into darkness. They turned out the lights, and for a long while the performers played without even being able to see their instruments.

Moments of the piece gave way to almost happenstance harmonies, such as the one in the all-too-brief excerpt here: [MUSICAL EXCERPT]

These instances, often invoking the overtone series as a break from the atonal or microtonal work

that dominated much of the piece, were always unstable, giving a fleeting taste of harmony before dissolving again into dischord. As Post-Modernism in some ways signals a return to pre-Socratic Greek philosophies such as that of Heraclitus, we find here an utterly unconsoling message – there is no port of arrival, no haven; there is only striving for short reprieves of harmony that so quickly collapse on themselves. It reminded me of the despair in Sebald's work, or the first stanza of T. S. Eliot's "East Coker"

But there was something comforting to me in this message; even in the most despairing of ideas, there's still that feeling of communion that comes with communication; this feeling has its own value, and is subtly consoling in itself. As the concert hall plunged a second time into darkness, this time with a very jarring strobe light in use, I leaned back and imagined the whole audience as seen from space, from just past the limit of the atmosphere, our whole ambition for a kind of golden age of culture (most of the crowd were people dedicated in one way or another to the future of music) probably similar to the fleeting blips of harmony in the piece itself, before the guard changes and vortices of culture dissipate like twisters in a draining tub. Yet that expression still made me feel more alive than ever – that someone could articulate that, and so powerfully, and so recently as 2000. There's also a consolation that comes when you realize you're not the only one with something on your mind...

Event photos from Park Avenue Armory.

Source: <http://virtualshellfish.com/?p=2788>