

Riffing on Prokofiev and Downsizing Schumann

Argento Chamber Ensemble at the DiMenna Center

By JAMES R. OESTREICH
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The Argento New Music Project took a circuitous route from the recent past to the near future at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music on Saturday evening, plunging deep into history along the way.

The program, “Symphonies of Song,” began with a work from 2012, neither symphony nor song: “Megalomania,” a 10-minute piano work by Michel Galante, the conductor of the Argento Chamber Ensemble, the performance arm of the project. An oblique tribute to a friend with a personality disorder, the piece was written, Mr. Galante wrote in a program note, when he was “struggling to make sense of the irrational, unstable tendencies of the human mind and its darker, more destructive potential.”

The work seemed to take its basic impetus and contour from the finale of Prokofiev’s Seventh Sonata, a driving perpetual-motion toccata, adding a querulous tone, with frequent disruptions and nerve-jangling pounding on the piano’s top register. Stephen Gosling, the ensemble’s pianist, gave a compelling performance.

After intermission the ensemble gave the United States premieres of recent works by composers to be represented at the Salzburg Biennale in Austria next month: “... wie Stille Brannte das Licht” (2009) by Georg Friedrich Haas, the winner of the 2013 State of Salzburg International Composition Prize, and “Canto” (2011) by Aureliano Cattaneo, a runner-up.

“Canto,” an attractive study in textures and colors of about 13 minutes, began austerely with isolated notes extended and finally twisted off. An insistent soprano saxophone injected an elaborate falling motif, which led to a raucous middle section of cascading descents. Austerity returned before a final tumble down the steps.

The Haas work is an expressionistic cycle of love songs for an age in which lovers — though now largely spared the complications of social constraint and the dangers of syphilis and AIDS — risk having, in Mr. Haas’s words, “nothing to say to each other.” The song settings for soprano range from a plain, mostly syllabic treatment of Georg Trakl’s “Bläue Meiner Augen” (“The Blue of My Eyes”), the source of the line from which the cycle takes its title (“... how still the light burns”) to a breathless setting of August Stramm’s “Erhört” (“Need”), with swooping interjections evoking Sprechstimme.

Mr. Haas’s orchestrations are as dense as Mr. Cattaneo’s are typically spare, particularly in an introduction and two interludes of vocalise, in which the voice becomes essentially just another instrument. Sharon Harms, the soprano, did well to find her way through harmonies heaped with microtonal dissonances and delivered the texts with eloquent expressivity.

The historical digressions came before intermission, with Schumann’s Third Symphony in a new arrangement for string quintet, woodwind quintet and trombone by Kimmy Szeto. The trombone, though not used by Schumann through three of the work’s five movements, fitted in comfortably with the French horn and inherited some fine solo moments.

Even for a listener not much bothered, as some are, by Schumann’s sometimes thick orchestrations, this reduction made for a fascinating exercise, clarifying myriad details, though it proved a decidedly odd foil to the rest of the program.

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