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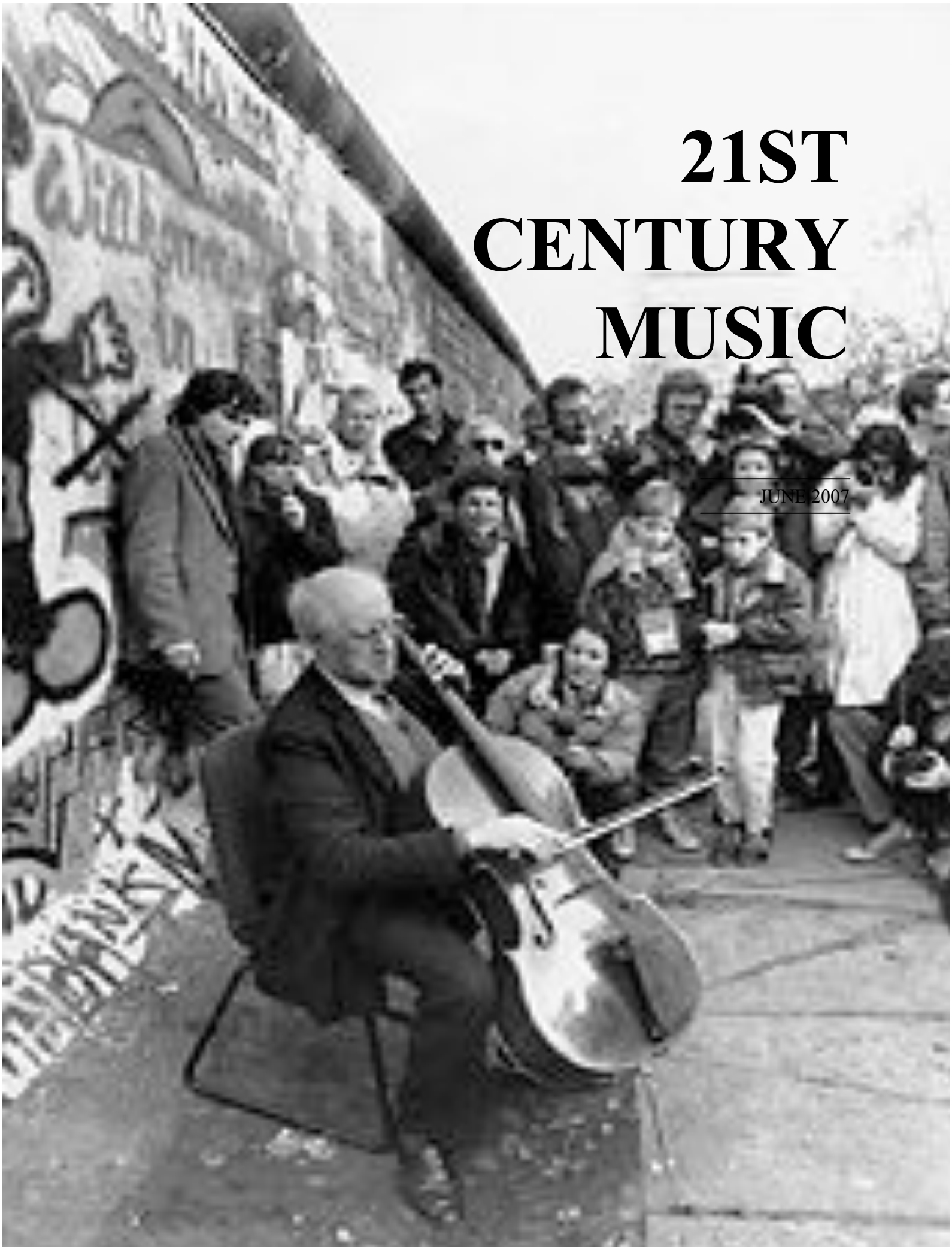

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Editorial Staff

Second Helpings from Sergio Roberto de Oliveira

TOM MOORE

Sergio Roberto de Oliveira is an active presence in the contemporary music scene of Rio de Janeiro, working with the composers' collaborative Prelúdio 21 (along with Alexandre Schubert, Caio Senna, Heber Schünemann, Marcos Lucas, Neder Nassaro, and Orlando Alves). In 2006 he celebrated ten years of professional activity as a composer with his first solo CD release, *Sem Espera*, devoted to his works for flute, the largest part of his oeuvre, and including works for solo flute, flute duo, flute trio, and one quartet. Falls House Press (based in New Hampshire) will gradually be publishing all of his flute compositions in the United States. We talked at Oliveira's studio, A Casa Discos, in Rio de Janeiro in late 2006.

TM: Let's talk a little about the flute. You studied the instrument in order to be able to write idiomatically for it – but why the flute? What is it about the flute that attracts you?

SRO: I think the instrument is great, perhaps due to the fact that I heard a lot of choro when I was growing up, a lot of popular music, and I always thought the flute was simply beautiful. Of course, there is one thing that attracts you to start with, and then you discover other aspects. For me, the first thing would be my childhood memories, an emotional connection. Later I went beyond just simply the sonority. The fact that it is made of metal, but a woodwind, that it is sweet, but generates an infinite number of harmonics, I think is really great, and one of the things that I am looking for when writing for a group of flutes is exactly those harmonics, to take care with the tensions, the small intervals, or those others that will really resound. I really like the resultants from the flute. On this CD [Sem Espera], when we were mixing, I was very happy to see how well we had managed to capture the resultant harmonies.

The flute also has that similarity with the human voice, and that is something which creates yet another link between the way I hear and the flute. Studying flute was very important – it turned out right.

TM: Often composers have an intimate relationship with the piano, and this has effects on how their music is written. Piano music is quite chordal, may be contrapuntal, but music that takes the voice, one line, as its basis, has other qualities. Your works for the flute are contrapuntal but avoid a chordal idiom.

SRO: Quite right. This is very interesting, since my instrument is the piano, and particularly interesting since I come originally from popular music. I played popular music before I started composing classical music, and in popular music you are always thinking about chords, about a melody and accompaniment, but my passion for counterpoint is undeniable. My music has its basis in counterpoint. I had the good luck to study with a great contrapuntist, David [Korenchendler], a great teacher of counterpoint. This gave me the tools to allow me to create the music that was in my head, though at the same time I have always been thinking about harmony, a harmony that is atonal, but still harmony. I am always interested what results from the combination of the various lines. I remember that when I was studying with Guerra-Peixe we studied "acoustic harmony", and discovering acoustic harmony changed my life. It gave me a chance to think about harmony outside a tonal context, without having to think about the triads from popular music.

TM: The principal challenge for today's composer is to find a balance between the obvious and the hermetic, between the accessible cliché and something difficult and rebarbative. Your music is quite far from common practice tonality, but at the same time has something charming which speaks directly to the new listener, even someone who does not know contemporary music. How do you attract the listener without falling into the clichés of past centuries?

SRO: For me this is fundamental. For various reasons, including psychological ones I have always needed to be liked. I need to communicate. My mission as an artist is to communicate with someone. Though not necessarily with a someone of today. I can certainly produce a piece which I think will be understood by very few people today, and which will be better understood a few decades from now. This has always been a decisive factor in my music – I want to communicate. As a producer I think this is fundamental as well. You have to build audiences, you have to attract people to what you are doing. Listening to popular music and working in popular music created for me a Brazilian accent which I carry over into my classical music. Although my music is structured rationally, it nevertheless speaks with a Brazilian voice, which is unavoidably popular.

TM: Let's talk a little about "brasilidade." Here in Brazil it is obvious what is Brazilian and what is not. The influences of folk and popular music are always present. Outside the country it is perhaps more difficult for listeners to pick these out. What is it that makes music Brazilian?

SRO: I think we are trying to invent this country, trying to discover what it is to be Brazilian. I am not a theorist. Certainly the question of the music of the Brazilian people, of popular culture carries with it this matter of national identity. What we have always had in Brazil is the figure of the artist who goes to Europe to become learned, and returns to Brazil. When he gets back, this great mixture of cultures, the culture of the blacks, of the Portuguese, of the Indians, of all the other immigrants, makes you produce something that is Brazilian. I don't know exactly what it means to be Brazilian, but I really like the vision of the Modernists. To be Brazilian is to be able to mix, to absorb, to accept what is foreign, what is different. This is why I am always bothered by prejudice, prejudice of any kind. If you proclaim that you are white, or black, or Indian, or Japanese in Brazil, that is something that rubs me the wrong way. There are countries which may say that they are completely white or black or Indian -- we are something else; we are Brazilians, we are a mixture of all these things. We are a people which accepts, which welcomes with open arms (and here you have the Carioca influence) that which comes from anywhere, and this comes to be another ingredient in this great cultural broth. And so what it is to be Brazilian is changing at every moment. A hundred years ago we did not have the influences that we have today, but what continues is this possibility of welcoming with open arms, and of transforming what is received into something Brazilian, to mold and to let oneself be molded, to transform and to let oneself be transformed.

TM: Brazilian music has qualities which attract listeners from all over the world. A happiness, a spontaneity combined at the very same time with suffering, an acceptance of all of life….

SRO: Yes. This duality which we have of pain and happiness, our capacity of celebrating sadness, of making fun of ourselves…the greatest quality of the Brazilian is that he can laugh at himself, at life, at pain…and this has a social side which can often be cruel, but we are never only sad, simply sad, we can be sad, but we can discover a smile, a happiness. In my piece for harpsichord solo [the Suite] which Tracy Richardson premiered, I remember that I was trying to explain this to her (I don't know how well I managed to get this across to her as an American) that one of the movements was presenting someone's pain, but a pain that we celebrate. Even suffering can dance.

TM: And at the same time happiness cries.

SRO: Of course, of course. We enjoy being down in the dumps (maybe it is something human, but I can only speak from my experience as a Brazilian) – we like it. It's delicious to suffer, just as happiness brings the suffering of knowing that it is transitory, that it will end, and of knowing that not everyone is happy….

TM: Essa sopa vai acabar – the party has to end.

SRO: The end of Carnaval, of Ash Wednesday, is emblematic of this. Carnaval is wonderful, it is the moment for you to let go, get rid of all the things that are oppressing you, but you know that Ash Wednesday is going to arrive.

TM: Brazilian rhythms are strongly present in your music for flute, and ostinatos. The rhythmic structure is fundamental to the effect which the music makes. Where does your approach to rhythm come from? From popular music as well?

SRO: In most cases, yes. What you noted about ostinatos is very interesting, since this also comes from popular music. The other day we were talking about clichés of tonal music, and in popular music, based on dance, rhythmic clichés are fundamental. Samba always has the same beat, the baião, always has that same beat, with variations. When I want to make reference to a Brazilian rhythm, the ostinato is a way of doing this, even if the rhythm of the ostinato is not a specifically Brazilian rhythm. I want to create a rhythmic cliché on which I can base a melody. Here we have once more the presence of accompanied melody which comes from popular music.

My music is always dealing with these two things at the same time -- counterpoint and these rhythms. Brazilian rhythms or intervals which refer to Brazilian music. One complements the other, and you often see this in different movements. For example in the Trio no. 1 [for flutes] the first movement is based almost entirely on a very characteristic rhythm, in block chords, the three flutes playing together, and the third movement is a fugue, with some wild counterpoint, which I am very proud, and at the same time, an ostinato. And lyricism in the second movement, which is a song. You see this structure in various works of mine -- I want to give the public, within the same piece, a variety of emotions, intentions, thoughts.

TM: Almost all of your works have as their origin a request or a commission. The great writer Philip Pullman, asked for advice on writing says "Write only what you want to write. Please yourself". But as a composer writing a commission for a flutist, you must please the flutist, and the audience. How do you strike a balance?

SRO: First of all, my commissions have been very generous, with plenty of latitude regarding what I write. Of course, when I am writing a piece for you, for Laura Rónai, for any musician, I have in my head what it is that is going to make you enjoy playing that piece of music. I think "what Sergio is it that this person likes?" Why did he ask me for this music? What is it in my music that appeals? What side of my thinking should I emphasize for that person?

TM: Which "Faces" [title of a duo for flute by SRO from 2000]….

SRO: In the pieces which you asked me to write Brazilian rhythms are very much present. For you as a foreigner, as a non-Brazilian, they are wonderful. If I am going to write something for Ana Paula [Cruz] I will take advantage of that immense sound of hers, which you can hear in the two trios on Sem Espera. She is always the third flute, with a big, beautiful, robust sound.

TM: You have told me on many occasions that the most difficult part of writing a piece is to find the concept, the hook, which you structure the piece around. There are composers who begin with a vague idea, and the piece takes shape as it is written. But for you, once the concept is there, the rest flows naturally.

SRO: First I have to think of the music as a whole, all of the aspects, the size it will be, its proportions, the form. First, there is the idea. What do I want to say in this music? This can be something technical, or not. In the *Trio No. 2*, I play with the idea of the maracatu, but the melody enters on the wrong beat. The motif should be a pickup, but it's not. And this deforms the rhythmic accents.

First I have a big idea, and I will use this idea to build the whole structure. When I sit down to write, I am already at the easiest part -- choosing the notes. Music for me is not about choosing notes. Music is in thought, musical thought. The notes have to be an expression of this, and so they will obey criteria which are more technical, rather than musical. Why write a piece in one key, and not another? Because in the context of the tessitura I want to use, the piece has to begin on that note, and not on another.

When I sit down to write, that's the easiest part. It's not by chance that my blog is called *Choosing Notes*.

TM: Do you think there might be a connection with the theater here? In the commedia dell'arte all that exists begins with the situation and the characters. I am thinking particularly of your series of duos, but for the other pieces as well.

SRO: That is something that had never occurred to me. Something that is very clear for me, especially for the pieces for flute, when I am working with chamber music for players who are well-established, not for larger groups, but for trios, quartets, quintets, duos, I always think of characters. I always have a vision of various different characters. But I had never connected the process with the theater. Perhaps, perhaps. In Sem Espera, especially in the trios and the quartet, you clearly have different characters. In the first movement of the Trio no. 1, which is called "Presentation", they begin by playing as a block, and then I let each character introduce himself with a little solo. I think this matter of thinking of the characters is connected with counterpoint, because in counterpoint you have various characters, and unlike in the theater, they can all be talking at once, and it comes out right.

TM: People say that the great genius of Mozart as a composer for the opera was that he was able to combine four or five different characters, but within one piece of music that functions as a whole.

SRO: This is the great advantage which music has over theater. Both music and theater happen in time, but we can stop time when we think of verticality, when we think of various things happening at the same time. I can be thinking of "x" number of things, and you can hear those things, each one separately, and also can hear the combination. You can have different planes of hearing and understanding the music.

TM: Your Duo is one of the oldest pieces in your oeuvre. How does it reflect your musical thinking at the time?

SRO: It is the first piece which I wrote which was performed publicly. You can get a good view of the student of composition becoming a composer. I was saying to Alexandre Bittencourt and Rudi Garrido as we were recording it that it was the piece I wanted as my opus 1 – that I have always been trying to be as successful as I was in writing the Duo. It has two distinct movements. The first is contrapuntal, where I am trying to explore the tension and interest of the sonority of small intervals, the tritones which produce beautiful resultant tones. In the second movement I am still working with minor seconds, major sevenths, minor sevenths, but exploring the Brazilian, rhythmic elements, the rhythmic clichés of Brazilian music.

TM: The Fantasia, a great work, is perhaps less explicitly Brazilian, with
a very lyrical character. Here the influence of American jazz is particularly evident, which is not often found in your work.

SRO: Yes, although I like to listen to and play jazz. Another piece where it is present is the piano work *Atonas*, as it is in the third movement of the *Fantasia*. I wrote the work for Laura Rónai, and her most sterling quality is her lyrical expressiveness. In writing for her, I don't think about Brazilian music – it's not something that speaks to her on a fundamental level, not the first thing that appeals. Hence the lyricism. You find the rhythmic qualities in the final movement, the jazz influences, since I needed something to contrast with all the cantabile of the first two, with a sort of dialogue between the upper and lower ranges of the
flute.

TM: …which also evokes her in conversation.

SRO: Indeed.

TM: You also wrote *Sem Espera* [a quartet] in response to a commission from Laura Rónai, an educational piece for a group of flutists who were less advanced technically, but even without virtuoso writing the piece makes a strong effect. For me it is your work that is closest to bossa nova, another style rarely evoked in your music.

SRO: True, and I will certainly say for the whole world to hear that one of my greatest influences is Tom Jobim. Laura asked for a piece for a course that she was going to teach in Tocantins. The title works very well for my first CD after ten years as a composer ("No waiting"), and the piece has that name because she asked for it a week before she had to travel. I was looking for a lyrical, even melancholy quality. The bossa nova quality comes from the chords that I am using, more diatonic, tonal, familiar to people who play and listen to popular music. Since not everyone listens to contemporary music, I wanted to create an emotional connection between those instrumentalists and the music.

TM: In the trios you have the presence of the personalities of the three flutists.

SRO: The first trio was not dedicated to the Trio Rónai [Maria Carolina Cavalcanti, Rudi Garrido, Ana Paula Cruz], which had not been formed yet, but in the second trio even the names of the movements are in homage to the performers, and draw explicitly on the talents of each one. It is funny how three such talented people can have talents, sounds, and expression which are so different. What luck to have these three people playing together at the same moment in time, three students of Laura – I think they are three great talents in Brazilian music.

The Trio commissioned the second trio on the day that they were recording the first. I said, playfully, "What does each of you want?" Ana Paula told me to write whatever I felt like, Maria Carolina asked for a piece without a D or a B-flat -- I don't remember exactly anymore -- she was just pulling my leg, since at the recording session she was having a problem with getting those notes to sound -- and Rudi asked for something that was very Brazilian. The movements are puns on their names. As it happens their talents are very much evident in the first trio as well. They all picked the flute parts that suited them.

TM: I asked you for the *Twelve Bagatelles* because every flutist plays sets of exercises from Andersen and that period, but there are fewer sets of modern pieces which work on musical and technical problems.

SRO: I wrote a set in which each work has its own particular challenge, but it is not a pedagogical work. There isn't a particular technical problem for each one. The level of difficulty is a little more varied, some easier, some harder to play. If you play all 12 it is an apprenticeship. I was very happy to hear during our recording sessions for Sem Espera from Ana Paula Cruz that a student of hers was playing the first bagatelle, the Tango.

TM: In the nineteenth century studies the difficulty lies more coordinating the movements of fingers and tongue, but here the difficulty is more cerebral -- to manage to count the rhythms, to find the music that lies within the intervals and rhythms. The difficulty is mental, cerebral.

SRO: This is where music happens. Pauxy Gentil-Nunes, who recorded the *Bagatelles*, called me the night before the recording session, to say that he had just noticed some important details -- "Now I am going to have to work on them all over again. I see that these two bagatelles have various different levels, as if there were different flutists playing…". This was great, because I always want there to be various different levels on which you can understand my music, from the most basic level of the listener, to the instrumentalist who is enjoying what he is playing…but if he keeps looking, he will be discovering other things. The bagatelles, scales, and arpeggios, things which you would expect to find in studies for flute, have very complex musical structures -- each one of the scales is very different, from well-known scales to modal scales, scales based on mathematical series. The arpeggios have a triangular structure. There are some technical difficulties, but once you get past the difficulties you begin to make music. Some of the bagatelles are much more lyrical, for the student to work on, or for the performer to express himself. Expression is fundamental -- you have to show your lyrical side.

Concert Review

Hits and Misses from Misters Stravinsky and Takemitsu

MARK ALBURGER

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Igor Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments, Apollo*, and *Symphony of Psalms*; and Toru Takemitsu's *Fantasma/Cantos* (with Richard Stoltzman). April 4, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Not everything Ludwig van Beethoven wrote was a masterpiece. And not everything Igor Stravinsky wrote was, either. That was clear enough on April 4, when Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas led the San Francisco Symphony in a mixed program of Toru Takemitsu and Stravinsky at Davies Hall.

The great work was Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), in an interpretation that was fresh at every step. The taut first movement kept listeners breathless in a performance that took nothing for granted and coaxed new possibilities out of this familiar music, where the orchestra and the Symphony Chorus provided energy and polish.

The second movement, always in danger of being a mere academic angular affair, sustained a surprising sweetness; and the third underscored the ironic disconnect between the Latin text and the music, where seemingly clangorous passages are transformed into sustained moments of rapture. This was a beautiful, engaging reading among the best.

There was nothing particularly wrong with the realization of the composer's slightly earlier *Apollo (Apollon Musagete)* (1928 -- all three of the Stravinskys on the program were from the early years of his second, neoclassic period), except that it's simply not as strong a piece. For a number of us who have listened to this work for years, it has kept itself apart, in a cool, color-opaque world that seems skewed more to the classical than the neo. That fact that many still return to the piece, however, tellingly suggests that there is still much of merit here. But, for the money, the other two Balanchine ballets on classical subjects (*Orpheus* and *Agon*) offer greater rewards.

The third Stravinsky on the bill, the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, occupies that middle ground as a minor masterpiece: a refined, problematic gem that is worthy of bringing out of storage every once in a while to admire. And there was much to admire in this sensitive, austere telling of a quixotic transitional essay (1920) that presaged the composer's transition from the Russian folkloric to the International thievoric.

The odd Stravinsky-out was Takemitsu's rhapsodic, one-movement clarinet concerto, *Fantasma/Cantos*, winningly argued by the eccentric and virtuosic Richard Stoltzman. This one-theme transfigured-all tome takes off, as much of early Stravinsky, from the coloristic sound-world of Claude Debussy's impressionism. But where the Russian adds rhythm, this Japanese master goes for super-diffuse and leisurely, as a walk around a garden. For this reviewer, a run around with the Takemitsu percussion concerto *Cassiopeia* is a more satisfying exercise.

Halfway All the Way

KEN BULLOCK

Halfway Mark, excerpts from 33 years of music by Mark Alburger, with members of San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra and San Francisco Cabaret Opera / Goat Hall Productions. April 20, Old First Church, San Francisco, CA.

Already 18 days a semicentenarian, Mark Alburger managed, on April 20, to fit a 50th-birthday celebration into his frenetic schedule, in the form of a concert at Old First Church in San Francisco. Dubbed Halfway Mark, the show promises many more works from here on out, but nonetheless remains a misnomer. Nothing Alburger does is ever halfway.

On the Sacramento Street side of Old First, a flyer was posted that lauded Alburger's output so far of "over 800 individual pieces, including 16 concerti, 20 operas, six song cycles and nine symphonies."

As I peered at this wry statistical tribute, Alburger issued from the church portals, greeted me cheerfully, and walked past down the blow. When I got inside, two minutes later, there he was again, everywhere at once, in and out, greeting friends, family and artistic collaborators, as well as firming up the details for the compressed marathon innocuously styled a birthday part.

"I've been writing music for 33 years," said the composer from the raised front of the sanctuary that serves as a stage, in explanation of the 33 items on the program, adding he'd titled "four fake pieces to give an idea of the decades" each being loaded with excerpts and vignettes form longer works in chronological order. After drawing our attention to the title of the first decadenal grab-bag, *Early Instruments of Comotion* (normalized to "Commotion" by Spellcheck in the program) -- the other decades entitled successively, a neo-modern *Desert Bass Wind Color, Lost Beyond* (and nothing more), and an intriguingly Sondheimish *Opera in the Dark* -- Mark took the pulpit, requested that applause, "if any," be held until the end of each decade, himself then launching into the text of (and for) Psalm 6, Opus1 (1974), noted as derived from Cageian algorhythms, intoning in staccato fashion "O Lord, do not condemn me" and "She-ol," sounding for all the world like a character from the films of David Lynch or early John Waters, all in conjunction with beautiful phrases from oboist Philip Freihofner.

Ecclesiastes, Op. 3 (1975), quickly followed, with a dynamic solo by soprano Bianca Showalter and the celebration was off with a bang from the assembled forces of the San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra. Even the first few minutes had me breathless, already behind as one piece became another, pulling out ahead of the too contemplative. My notes read: "Bold orchestral sound launching the piece with big bass chords yet almost Oriental strings -- a quick segue to syncopated piano, followed thematically by something sprightly but more composed for the ivories," references to V*ariations and Theme*, Op. 6 (1976), and the "Sonata" of *The Twelve Fingers*, Op. 8 (1977). The range of music -- and musical taste -- was staggering (an advisable expression, as I was drunk on the sounds).

By the time I caught up, Lisa McHenry was whispering a recitation under William Loney and Karl Coryat's tenor lines, as the lush music of *Orpheus Cycle*, Op. 24 (1982), "after Wagner, 50's rock, club jazz, Bali, and Beethoven"...was just that, of course.

Alburger is the sort of composer very much in company with compatriots, of many times and places. He names his influences and inspirations as he cross-pollinates and hybridizes them, a Luther Burbank bearing strangely beautiful musical fruit. There's the aforementioned Beethoven, Wagner and John Cage, George Crumb and Herr Mozart, San Francisco's own Henry Cowell (Wolfgang and Henry bound together in the 8-note "lipogram" for piano of *The Twelve Fingers* Sonata). *Three Places in America*, Op. 13 (1978) is described as "Neoclassical, neolatino, neomedieval necromancy" and was graced by both Alexis Alrich and Lisa Scola Prosek at the piano. The "Urban Scherzo" of *Some Stuff*, Op. 16 (1979), followed, from another collective influence, the Rolling Stones' *Some Girls*.

As the show went forward, the music continued to redouble itself, diverse styles wedded together, ongoing lines veering from elusive to pert to outright gorgeous, sometimes in a space of mere measures. In an excerpt from Crystal Series, Op. 32 (1987), named for the composer's then newly-born daughter (who came from Wisconsin to be present, as had his parents from Philadelphia and sister from New York), oboist Freihofner was again allowed shine, while Alburger, himself a bravura tenor, swung in on *At a Photoshop*, Op. 37 (1989), "Overseas karaoke after a language lesson" and did a backwards Groucho walk before belting out "Information Wanted (from *L.A. Stories*, Op. 50 [1994]) -- as the program increasingly zeroed in on opera.

Soprano Eliza O'Malley, who sang several pieces, including *Waiting for Godot* and *Antigone*, seconded my amazement later on, when cake and Martinelli's Sparkling was served at the reception -- and that most famous and played of all songs was finally sung in its normal form (Alburger had ended the concert with his own gloss as *Grating Prelude*) -- at learning that Alburger had only composed two operas (the first taking five years) before meeting Harriet March Page, the founder and artistic director of SF Cabaret Opera / Goat Hall Productions, and Alburger's partner in every way. Eighteen more operatic outbursts have cascaded out, setting plays by John Steinbeck and Tennessee Williams and Eugene Ionesco, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* from Robert Browning's poem, and *Henry Miller in Brooklyn*, with lyrics by Mel Clay. Four were in collaboration with librettist Page, and the show ended appropriately with *The Ring of Harriet*, Op. 142 (2006), with lyrics ("I went back to my old voice teacher / thought I'd pass myself off as a / character mezzo but he said oh no you're a // dramatic soprano and you / must be brunnhilde you've got to be kidding I said / but he wasn't) played out in high hilarity by two sopranos (Suzanna Mizell and Maggie Tennenbaum) and three mezzos (Janet Lohr, Lisa McHenry and Cynthia Weyuker), many Valkyries vying for their very own ring o fire, with spears held aloft and Viking helmets tumbling off for the curtain call.

40 instrumentalists and singers put their considerable talents a the service of celebrating their colleague and friend, including John Kendall Bailey, Associate Conductor of SF Composers Chamber Orchestra, who noted that it's well-known that Mark doesn't let many other people conduct his music -- so, an honor! Alburger's fellow composes wandered around afterwards, amid candles and crumbs, including Karl Coryat, Lisa Prosek, Erling Wold and the redoubtable Brian Holmes toting his French horn. All in all, a fine, happy party for the Halfway Mark -- or to celebrate the curtain going up on Part Two, including the premiere of a setting of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at Goat Hall's *Fresh Voices VII* programs, June 15-16, 22, and 24.

Stone Reynolds

DAVID SHAMROCK

Music That Cooks: Galax Quartet in music of Carl Stone and Belinda Reynolds. April 29, College Avenue Presbyterian Church, Oakland, CA.

As part of their *Music That Cooks* series at Oakland's College Avenue Presbyterian Church, on April 29, the Galax Quartet presented works by Carl Stone and Belinda Reynolds. A unique feature of the group is their incorporation of the Baroque viola da gamba, substituting, in most cases, for the modern viola. Much of the charm of a Galax concert lies in the quartet's informal mini-lectures they offer between pieces: anecdotal details about a composer's life, the unusual genesis of a particular piece, or the peculiarities of the gamba itself, for example.

Galax cellist David Morris introduced Carl Stone's quartet *Mai Ploy*, noting its subtle Stravinskian influences. Though primarily known as a composer of electronic and sampled media, Stone recently began to compose for acoustic ensembles as well. His quartet takes its name from a Los Angeles-based Chinese restaurant. As Morris stated, the title of the piece is merely that, having nothing to do with the musical content. Yet, one could not help but notice the wisping pentatonic fragments drifting into thin air. As violinists David Wilson and Joseph Edelberg delivered these sparse melodic shards set to the backdrop of a delicate pizzicato cello, the texture grew thicker and more ebullient, and one could hear the influences to which Morris had referred.

The concert centerpiece was Belinda Reynolds's *Envisions*, a multi-sectioned, primarily through-composed quartet written specifically for a commission from Galax. Reynolds and Whelden gave a brief demonstration of a few of the gamba's characteristics. Due to its flatter bridge, for example, the gamba can more easily play triple-stops than modern string instruments. Reynolds exploited this ability in her quartet, and the gamba part frequently provided a chordal, but highly syncopated, accompaniment for the spiraling treble lines of the other instruments.

Reynolds's propulsive music is characterized by restless, striving lines that persistently grasp for a resolution that is always just beyond reach. Melodically, each individual line is often rather simple, built of few pitches. Yet she achieves a subtle harmonic variety by combining repeating strands of differing lengths in such a way as to create a continuously shifting kaleidoscopic fabric. The Galax Quartet performed her piece with passion and playfulness. Reynolds has, perhaps unfortunately, been pigeonholed as a "post-minimalist." While it is true that she shares certain traits with the post-minimalists, her music possesses a broader emotional and textural range than such a label implies.

In their commentary, Reynolds and members of the Galax Quartet stressed the collaborative nature of their work on her quartet. Both parties were unabashedly enthusiastic about the process. Hopefully, it will be an ongoing relationship, one which will continue to produce challenging new works.

Three Strauss Moods

PHILIP GEORGE

Alasdair Neale conducts the Marin Symphony in Richard Strauss's *Wind Serenade, Ein Heldenleben*, and *Four Last Songs* (with Rebecca Evans). Marin Veterans Auditorium, San Rafael, CA.

Aristotle thought, these days quite obviously, that everything had a beginning, a middle, and an end. And so it is with composers, many of whose life's works can be neatly divided into early, mid, and late periods. This was shown yet again on April 29, in a nice program on Richard Strauss, given by the Marin Symphony at Veterans Memorial Hall.

The stereotype is that an individual begins brash, reaches a pinnacle of excellence, and then tapers into an acceptance, mellowness, resignation vis-à-vis life, the universe, and everything. Strauss, like many of us, pretty much reflects this. His early *Serenade for Winds in E-Flat Major*, Opus 7, shows a promising young man poised for greatness, and here the 13 players, consisting of a pumped up "woodwind quintet" (i.e. flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and the interloping brass of French horns), enacted the work with requisite sparkle.

The main thrust of the evening's event was *Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life)*, which acknowledges that youthful arrogance was far from lost in mid-life. The composer, at the top of his game, brings us a now-classic soaring motif (for no less than nine hornists, in addition to cellos, appropriately rendered heroically in this performance) for "The Hero" -- pretty obviously himself. "The Hero's Adversaries," which follows directly in this six-movement symphonic poem (amounting to a symphony, really) played without pause, just as directly references Strauss's, by this point, many critics, who are Hector Berliozianly revenge-characterized by delightfully cackling woodwinds and stern (parallel fifth pedant!) low brass.

This was a performance that engaged the ear with every turn, and if Strauss gets a bit carried away in this Walt Whitmanesque celebration of self, Music Director Alasdair Neale and accomplices let him get away with it to the fullest. "The Hero's Companion" (a love song to Strauss's wife, Pauline de Anha) was tenderly caressed by solo violinist and concertmaster Jeremy Constant, and the offstage trumpeters made their telling effect in "The Hero's Battlefield." Both "The Hero's Works of Peace" and "The Hero's Escape from the World and his Fulfillment" contain references to our hero's earlier compositions, such as *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Death and Transfiguration,* and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, with its well-known do-

sol-do opening re-popularized in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*). This collage-like 1898 writing, along with the caterwauling chaos of the critics' music, which returns at several junctures, signals Strauss as a composer on the cusp of contemporary thought on the crisp of the last century.

Would it have been. Strauss's 20th-century work in opera, concerto, and art song remains brilliant.

But the mellowing of age, which began at least in the neoclassicism of *Der Rosenkavalier*, is totally realized in the *Four Last Songs*, beautifully, glowingly, and sumptuously rendered in that good night by soprano Rebecca Evans. "Beim Schlafengehn" ("Going to Sleep") is the title of the third of three Herman Hesse poems, and perhaps some of us took that too literally, but by the final movement, on Joseph von Eichendorff's "Im Abendrot" ("In Evening"), who could resist the moving last quotation from *Transfiguration* in this transfigured night?

Chronicle

April 4

San Francisco Symphony performs Igor Stravinsky's *The Fairy's Kiss* and *Symphony in Three Movements*. Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA.

April 5

Gustavo Dudamel conducts the Chicago Symphony in *Santa Cruz de Pacairigua* (1954) by Evencio Castellanos. Symphony Center, Chicago, IL. "Its snappy Latin syncopations, catchy folkloric tunes and colorful, percussion-laced scoring suggest Alberto Ginastera or Aaron Copland in his Mexican mode" [John von Rhein, The Chicago Tribune, 4/7/07].

Hornist Radovan Vlatkovic in Paul Dukas's *Villanelle*, Richard Strauss' *Das Alphorn*, and Olivier Messiaen's *Appel Interstellaire*. Benjamin Franklin Hall of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA. "Dating from 1971, it sounds every bit its age - experimental, scrupulously unmelodic, slightly arbitrary. It uses a small vocabulary of caustic techniques: stopped notes (jamming your hand up the bell of the horn to produce an edgy, buzzy muted tone); flutter tongue (a machine-gun-like interruption of the sound produced by pushing your tongue forward and letting it roll); and very fast chromatic flourishes. But it's a brief work, and all the more alluring when you realize that it was inspired by the American canyons" [Peter Dobrin, Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/7/07].

April 6

Death of Colin Graham, of respiratory and cardiac arrest, at 75. Creve Coeur, MO. "[He was] Artistic Director of the Opera Theater of St. Louis . . . . Graham staged 48 new productions at St. Louis, including Britten's *Gloriana, Billy Budd* and *Paul Bunyan* . . . and Bernstein's final version of *Candide*. His staging of David Carlson's *Anna Karenina*, for which he wrote the libretto, has its world premiere on April 28 at Florida Grand Opera in Miami, then opens in St. Louis in Jun -- his 57th premiere production. Other major premieres he directed include Minora Miki's *Tale of Genji* for St. Louis, John Corigliano's *Ghosts of Versaillles* for the Metropolitan Opera, Bright Sheng's *Madame Mao* for Santa Fe Opera and Andre Previn's *Streetcare Named Desire* for San Francisco Opera. A prolific librettist, Mr. Graham often wrote the librettos for the operas he directed, including works by Britten, Mr. Previn, Stephen Paulus, Richard Rodney Bennett, Mr. Sheng and Mr. Miki. . . . In 1958 he moved to the English Opera Group, the beginning of a long association with Britten and his music. He directed all but one of the composer's stage works, including the world premieres of *Noye's Fludde, Curlew River, The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*. He staged *Owen Wingrave* for BC Television. He also produced] Prokofiev's *War and Peace* at Sadlers Wells" [Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Times, 4/97].

April 7

Absolute Ensemble in *Absolute Arabian Nights*. Town Hall, New York, NY. In 1887 a Polish scholar named Ludwig Zamenhof introduced an international language he called Esperanto. . . . Zamenhof's language failed in part because it imposed intellectual rules on an organism with a mind of its own. Twelve-tone music might be said to have failed for the same reason. Languages, musical or otherwise, react to human pressures. They either collide or intermix or both, depending on what is happening in the world. The political collisions of West and Middle East, not to mention uneasy foreign relations between classical and popular musical styles, were really the subject of the evening." [Bernard Holland, The New York Times, 4/9/07].

April 8

Esa-Pekka Salonen, in the Los Angeles Times, announces his decision to step down from conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic, after his term ends in 2009 -- his successor to be Gustavo Dudamel. Los Angeles, CA.

Death of Sol LeWitt, of complications from cancer, at 78. New York, NY. "LeWitt helped establish Conceptualism and Minimalism as dominant movements of the postwar era" [Michael Kimmelman, The New York].

April 11

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Igor Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments, Apollo*, and *Symphony of Psalms*; and Toru Takemitsu's *Fantasma/Cantos* (with Richard Stolzman). Davies Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Beyond the Machine 7.0., including Kenji Bunch's *Ghost Reel* and Steve Reich's *Tokyo/Vermont Counterpoint.* Juilliard School, New York, NY. Through April 13.

Death of novelist Kurt Vonnegut, after brain injuries from a fall. New York, NY.

April 12

New Century Chamber Orchestra in Arvo Part's *Tabula Rasa.* St. John's Church, Berkeley, CA.

April 13

Oliver Knussen. Zankel Hall, New York, NY.

Le Petit Mort (Now It's Time to Say Goodbye), danced to music of Dmitri Shostakovich. Performance Space 122, New York, NY.

April 14

Pamela Z's *Sonic Gestures*. Recombinant Media Labs, San Francisco, CA 94103.

Death of Don[ald Tai Loy] Ho (b. 8/13/30), of heart failure, at 76. Honolulu, HI. "[He] entertained tourists for decades . . . singing the catchy signature tune 'Tiny Bubbles'. . . . [He] was Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and German" [Jaymes Song, Associated Press, 4/15/07].

Golijov/Upshaw Young Artists Series. Weill Recital Hall, New York, NY. Also April 15.

Ingram Marshall's *Orphic Memories* performed by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

Pocket Concertos. Miller Theatre, Columbia University, New York, NY.

April 15

[Gyorgy] Kurtag's Ghosts. Mario Formenti plays 70 short pieces including music by Guillaume de Machaut, J.S. Bach, Robert Schumann, Modeste Mussorgsky, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Gyorgy Ligeti. Koret Auditorium, San Francisco, CA. "Kurtag['s] . . . homages are loving, tender, expressive and often hilarious; at times, they take a composer's most distinctive traits and humanize or soften them. I this context, Kurtag comes off like a clear-eyed but forgiving mimic at a family reunion" [Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle, 4/17/07].

Fred Randolph Quintet Octavia Lounge, San Francisco, CA.

American Symphony Orchestra in Franz Schreker *Der ferne Klang*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY.

April 16

Ornette Coleman wins the Pulitzer Prize in Music for *Sound Grammar*. "[T]he 77-year-old jazz saxophonist . . . said 'I'm tearing and I'm surprised and happy'" [The New York Times, 4/17/0

Charles Wuorinen's *Percussion Symphony* and *Percussion Quarte*t performed by Juilliard and Manhattan School of Music musicians Alice Tully Hall, New York, NY.

April 17

Celebrate Seattle! Pacific Northwest Ballet dances to works of John Cage and Lou Harrison and others, with choreography by Seattle natives Merce Cunningham, Robert Joffrey, Mark Morris, and Trisha Brown, among others. Seattle, WA.

April 19

Brenda Schuman-Post presents *Oboes Of The World*. San Francisco Conservatory of Music, San Francisco, CA.

April 20

Andrew Norman's *River of Mercy* premiered by the Oakland East Bay Symphony. Oakland, CA.

Halfway Mark, excerpts from 33 years of music by Mark Alburger, with members of San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra and San Francisco Cabaret Opera / Goat Hall Productions. Old First Church, San Francisco, CA.

Michael Marrison, of Swarthmore College, and Ruth Smith, of Cambridge University, debate as to whether G.F. Handel's *Messiah* reflects anti-Semitism. Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

Giacomo Puccini's *Il Trittico*. Metropolitan Opera, New York, NY.

April 22

Ann Crumb on Broadway, a benefit for Orchestra 2001. Philadelphia, PA.

April 23

Death of choreographer Michael Smuin. San Francisco, CA.

April 28

Opus 21 in Postminimalism in the 21st Century. Richard Adams's - *Freefall*, Louis Andriessen's *Klokken voor Haarlem*, Anna Clyne's *Next Stop*, Mark Dancigers's *Thaw*, Dennis DeSantis's *One Trick Pony*, David Lang's *Stick Figure*, Steve Reich's *New York Counterpoint*, and Bill Ryan's *Rapid Assembly* (2007). Leonard Nimoy Thalia at Symphony Space, New York, NY.

April 27

Death of Mstislav Rostropovich (b. 3/27/27, Baku, Azerbaijan), of cancer, at 80. Moscow, Russia. "Rostropovich . . . was one of the three or four greatest cellists of the 20th century . . . . Among the composers who wrote music inspired by his genius were [Sergei] Prokofiev, [Dmitri] Shostakovich, [Benjamin] Britten, [Leonard] Bernstein, Witold Lutoslawski, and Alfred Schnittke. . . . As a pianist, he was a dexterous recital accompanist for his wife, soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. He taught generation of cellists, from Jacqueline Du Pre to Han-na Chang. . . . He left Russia in 1974 and remained in exile until the collapse of the Soviet Union. . . . Rostropovich made his first San Francisco appearance in 1956, playing Prokofiev's *Symphony-Concerto* -- one of the many cello works written for him . . . . Last year he led [The San Francisco] Symphony in two weeks of music by Shostakovich in honor of the composer's centennial. . . . He entered the Moscow Conservatory at 16, where he became acquainted with Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich. . . . Prokofiev, worn down near the end of his life by ill health and the repeated persecutions of the Soviet regime, found inspiration in the buoyant skills of the young virtuoso and revised his *Cello Concerto* for him. Shostakovich wrote his *First Cello Concerto* for him in 1959. Perhaps Rostropovich's most productive artistic friendship was with Benjamin Britten, whom he met in 1960 when he performed the Shostakovich in London. In the decade-and-a-half before his death in 1976, Britten composed his *Cello Sonata*, *Cello Symphony* and the three *Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* -- all mainstays of the modern cello repertoire -- for Rostropovich. Meanwhile, Rostropovich was developing as a conductor, beginning with a 1968 production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* at the Bolshoi theater in Moscow. . . .

He was a public supporter of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who lived with him for four years, and a critic of restrictions on cultural freedom. . . . Settling in the West, Rostropovich became music director of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington and a regular guest conductor with the London Philharmonic, and he recorded prolifically. In 1989, he performed [J.S.] Bach during the demolition of the Berlin Wall" [Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle, 4/28/07].

April 29

Sonos. Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, Lafayette, CA.

Easter Hangover. Selections from Brian Holmes's *Emily Dickinson Songs*, John Partridge's *Easter Liturgy*, Scott King's *Passion According to the Four Evangelists*, and Mark Alburger's *Ecclesiastes, Missa "The a deux," Orpheus Cycle, Aerial Requiem, Songs for Rebecca*, *San Rafael News*, and *Waiting for Godot*. Goat Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Comment

By the Numbers

Percentage of Americans who believe that Joan of Arc is Noah's wife.

10%

[Obviously they need to bone up on their Verdi, Honegger, Stravinsky, and Britten - ed.]

Items

I once went out to dinner with a member of a local city arts council, who admitted not really knowing anything about art or non-pop music, but she really thought art and artists were "cool". She then went on to say that she never voted for any projects that didn't have a social dimension, like school or prison outreach. She then ended the evening calling me, and abstract music and art in general, "elitist". Why should we give you money? she said - no one cares about what you do, you're not helping anybody. This is the person reviewing your application, folks.

George Cremaschi
Bay Area New Music, 4/6/07

[But isn't anyone who is in a position of financial authority elite? How does someone get on an arts council without knowing anything about art music? Why is it called an arts council? Are those that enjoy art music "nobody"? - ed.]

Writers

MARK ALBURGER is an eclectic American composer of postminimal, postpopular, and postcomedic sensibilities. He is Editor-Publisher of 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, an award-winning ASCAP composer of concert music published and recorded by New Music, Music Director of San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra and San Francisco Cabaret Opera, Instructor in Music Literature and Theory at Diablo Valley College, Music Critic for Commuter Times and San Francisco Classical Voice. oboist, pianist, vocalist, recording artist, and author. Dr. Alburger began playing the oboe and composing in association with James and Dorothy Freeman, Richard Wernick, and George Crumb. He studied with Gerald Levinson and Joan Panetti at Swarthmore College (B.A.), Jules Langert at Dominican University (M.A.), Roland Jackson at Claremont Graduate University (Ph.D.), and privately with Terry Riley. His *Waiting for Godot* will be premiered at the Fresh Voices VII Festival this June in San Francisco. Four of his compositions may be heard at myspace.com/markalburger.

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