

A Significant Concert of Contemporary Music For Accordion and 'Cello

Review by Robert Young McMahan, D.M.A.

An event of major importance to the world of contemporary classical accordion took place at the African Art Museum of the Fathers of the Society of African Missions, Tenafly, New Jersey, on January 13, 2002: a concert devoted almost entirely to contemporary music for accordion, including the world premiere of a piece by the noted American composer Charles Wuorinen. The performers were Madeleine Shapiro, 'cellist and founder of the truly unique and daring organization called MODERNWORKS, and the internationally acclaimed Finnish accordion virtuoso, Mikko Luoma.

At the beginning of the program, Ms. Shapiro announced that the "classical" accordion is both widely popular and fully accepted in art-music circles throughout much of Europe and Asia, and that in recent decades, many highly respected, "classical" composers have written for it, both as a solo instrument and as part of variously configured chamber ensembles. Mr. Luoma reinforced this statement by noting that in Finland---and other European nations as well-- performance students have long had the opportunity to "major" in accordion at the leading conservatories. Shapiro called attention to the compatibility of the 'cello and accordion, noting that their timbres complimented one another in a number of interesting ways.

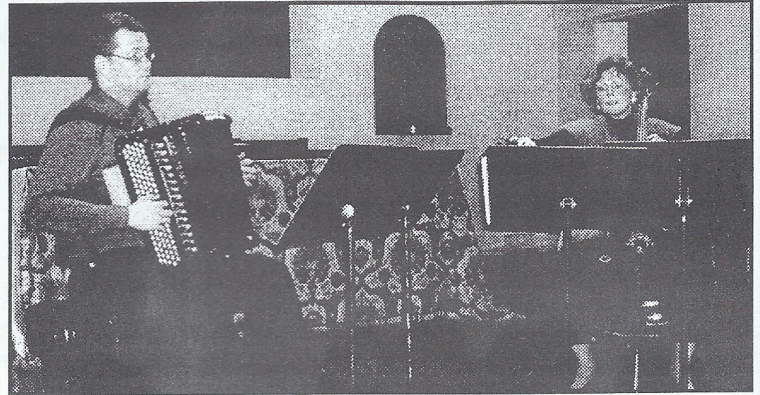
As noted, three of the five works on the program were duets, the remaining two being for solo 'cello and solo accordion, respectively. And the works that used the accordion treated the instrument imaginatively, exploiting its idiomatic capabilities and wedding them firmly to the language of contemporary atonal music.

Georg Katzer lives in Berlin, where he is the founder of an electro-acoustical studio and a member of the German Musical Council. Shapiro described his lengthy Attempted Approach for 'cello and accordion as being somewhat like a dance between the two instruments, one in which the dancers/instruments repeatedly approach and move away from each other with their motions. Particularly striking was Katzer's beautifully blended modulations of color between the instruments, often through sustained seconds and tone clusters, which were all the more effective by virtue of their fading into and out of each other through changes in dynamics achieved through bow and bellows.

Following Shapiro's performance of Magnus Lindberg's Stroke for unaccompanied 'cello, the duo performed Finnish composer Jukka Tiensuu's Plus III. In addition to being a prolific composer, Tiensuu is a harpsichordist, pianist, and conductor of note who specializes in contemporary music. Plus III is part of a series of five Plus-titled works, of which three others include accordion with other instruments: Plus I---accordion and clarinet; Plus IV--- accordion with clarinet and 'cello; and Plus V---accordion and strings.

Shapiro stated that Plus III struck her as a kind of dialogue or conversation between the two instruments. Like Katzer's Attempted Approach, Tiensuu's Plus III makes frequent use of color modulations and exaggerated crescendos and diminuendos, while it adds microtonal "pitch bends"---an effect made possible on the accordion by partially depressing a key while increasing the bellows pressure---which caused the instruments to go subtly in and out of tune with one another.

Next, Mikko Luoma performed Magnus Lindberg's Jeux d'anches, for solo accordion. Lindberg, a graduate of the Sibelius Academy and a founding member of the eclectic Ears Open Society, is one of Finland's most internationally prominent composers; and Jeux



Finnish accordionist, Mikko Luoma and cellist, Madeleine Shapiro performing "Buttons and Bows" by American composer, Charles Wuorinen

d'anches is Lindberg's second piece for the accordion, having been commissioned by the Finnish Accordion Institute at the behest of the pioneering Finnish accordionist Matti Rantanen. Lindberg describes the work as one that "tries to confront serial and spectral thinking," and states that it was influenced by the instrument's "specificity, with chains of legato chords interfering with the gestures of the performer's right hand." The title, he explains, comes from the organ terminology used by César Franck and others to describe the sonorities of reed instruments.

The concluding piece was Buttons and Bows by the prominent American composer Charles Wuorinen, its title quaintly borrowed from the Jay Livingston and Ray Evans hit tune of 1948. Wuorinen's piece has an intriguing subtitle, however: Superparticular Variations. Wuorinen explained to me (in a telephone interview) that the mathematical term "superparticular" refers here to the ratios that govern the tempo relationships between various segments of the piece, that is, relationships such as 4:3, 3:2, etc. He also noted that the piece is based on a pitch set (Wuorinen has always remained loyal to serial techniques). Buttons and Bows was through-composed and highly contrapuntal, with many very expressive moments and with both instruments kept constantly busy at the expense of solo passages.

The MODERNWORKS program in its entirety received two more performances in the days just after the New Jersey concert. These took place in New York City, at The Mannes College of Music and the Christ and St. Stephen's Church (where Wuorinen was present for the "official" premiere of the work) on January 16th and 17th, respectively.

To conclude, it was very heartening to me to witness a program of contemporary classical music by major composers of international repute performed by first-rate artists for a discerning audience of non-accordionists. The classical accordion needs more exposure in the contemporary mainstream outside of the accordion community so that it will become truly known on a universal basis. MODERNWORKS has provided such a forum.

See the MODERNWORKS web page www.modernworks.com. See also my more detailed review of the concert in the upcoming issue of *Free Reed Journal* (published by the Center for Free Reed Studies, at the City University of New York Graduate Center, Allan Atlas, editor; see <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/freereed/page2.html> for subscription information).