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Romantic Lushness Meets Post-Tonal Grittiness

On their new albums, composers Jessica Krash, Harold Meltzer and Mark Applebaum create novel hybrids.



Composer Harold Meltzer PHOTO: DANIEL LIN

By

Allan Kozinn

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Composers who cloak their works in the genre-agnostic garb of the post-Minimalist and indie classical styles get most of the attention now, but other approaches to contemporary musical language have not surrendered the field entirely. Lately it has seemed, in fact, as though the energy that indie composers have brought to new music has also enlivened styles that adhere more closely to traditional roots.

Recent CDs by the composers Jessica Krash, Harold Meltzer and Mark Applebaum show that there is still plenty to be said in hybrids that temper neo-Romantic lushness with post-tonal grittiness, as well as in electronic music and even post-tonal acerbity, particularly when it is tempered with a sense of novelty.

Ms. Krash's "Past Made Present" (Albany) offers five works in which she filters slices of the past through a contemporary sensibility. In "The Cantigas de Amigo of Martin Codax" and "Sulpicia's Songs" (both composed in 2015), that past is distant, but Ms. Krash's updating takes different forms. For the first, a setting of poetry from a 13th-century manuscript in which Codax's Galician-Portuguese poems of friendship and loneliness are accompanied by vaguely outlined melodies, Ms. Krash retained the melismatic Medieval vocal lines, but added a decidedly modern piano accompaniment in which splashes of color (including some plucking and strumming inside the instrument) amplify Codax's emotional outpouring.

"Sulpicia's Songs," based on sections of a work by the first century B.C. Roman poet Sulpicia, is more conventional: Ms. Krash made no attempt to imagine an ancient Roman musical style; instead, she captures Sulpicia's dignified outrage over being abandoned by her lover in an appealingly chromatic vocal line, with a mildly dissonant, emotionally responsive piano accompaniment. Emily Noël sings both works with an alluring clarity and fluidity, qualities that Ms. Krash matches at the keyboard.

A choral work, "Young Vilna" (2017), based on questions young Lithuanians posed to Ellen Cassedy, the author of "We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust," is alternately tense and hauntingly beautiful. And two instrumental works treat the past more abstractly: "Turns of Phrase" (2016) for flute and piano (played by Laura Kaufman and Ms. Krash) was inspired by an ancient (but still used) Japanese instrument, the shakuhachi, but is couched almost entirely in Western chromaticism; and "Delphi—What the Oracle Said" (1997, revised 2014), a melancholy soliloquy for solo cello, is given a firm (if not necessarily oracular) reading by Tanya Anisimova.

Mr. Meltzer, like Ms. Krash, is less interested in waging stylistic battles than in finding fresh ways to work with established forms and a mostly tonal language. A pairing of two works completed in 2016—a chamber setting of Wallace Stevens's "Variations on a Summer Day" and a Piano Quartet (Open G Records)—thrives on ample invention and an astute sense of color. The quartet, played by members of the Boston Chamber Music Society, is an episodic, single-movement piece, its stream of short sections marked in the score with calibrated expressions of emotional states—ardent, effervescent, contented and ecstatic, among them. It can seem whimsically changeable at times, but a handful of returning figures give it a unifying frame.

“Variations on a Summer Day” flows similarly, morphing gradually through each of the poem’s 20 brief stanzas, the music reflecting the imagery of the text. There is some overt tone painting—when Stevens mentions gulls, you hear them gabbling—but more typically, Mr. Meltzer’s responses capture Stevens’s shifting seaside moods. Abigail Fischer sings the piece vividly, with members of Sequitur, conducted by Jayce Ogren, moving easily through the score’s episodes of pointillism, stateliness and hazy dissonance.

Mr. Applebaum’s “Speed Dating” (Innova) is a fascinating stylistic grab bag. Its biggest treats involve very different kinds of text setting. In “Three Unlikely Corporate Sponsorships” (2016), Mr. Applebaum multitracked himself reciting comic, politically sharp-edged ruminations about Nestlé, General Motors and Halliburton, with clever wordplay yielding terrific rhythmic counterpoint.

“Clicktrack” (2015), played by the Southern Oregon University Percussion Ensemble, at first sounds like a straightforward percussion piece, full of chiming bell tones, tapping and scratching. But the sounds are governed by sonnets of K. Silem Mohammad, heard at first only by the musicians (as cues, in their headphones), and later by listeners as the percussionists recite (sometimes in whispers) fragments while playing.

The collection’s other works are atonal and process-driven. For “Skeletons in the Closet” (2009), Mr. Applebaum resurrected eight 1980s synthesizers, and created an algorithm to sample their sound libraries. The result is a riot of tactile bursts of timbre rarely heard since laptops became electronic music’s main instruments. In “Speed Dating” (2014), performed by the Stony Brook Contemporary Chamber Players, Mr. Applebaum brings together pairs of instruments for brief, spirited encounters before recombining them (hence the title). And Takao Hyakutome gives an acidic reading of “The Plate of Transition Nourishes the Chameleon Appetite” (1992, revised 1994), a tart solo violin work.

There are moments when you wish Mr. Applebaum would settle on a single musical language. But then, why should he?

—*Mr. Kozinn writes about music for the Journal.*