

# A LOT OF NIGHT MUSIC

BY ALAN RICH

## Roll Call



Esa-Pekka Salonen: *Glittering Dichotomie*

OVER TWO RECENT WEEKS I HEARD 14 works by composers of the century just ended (or just ending, if you're one of those), spread through six programs. Herewith, a slightly out-of-breath report on these concerts, in reverse chronological order.

**December 7:** Peter Serkin is soloist, with Christoph Eschenbach and the Philharmonic, in Peter Lieberon's *The Red Garuda*, a 25-minute piano concerto, tone poem with piano, neither or both, named after a bird in Buddhist mythology that flies and never stops. I want to like it, if only because Lieberon's father, record producer Goddard, was one of the industry's true heroes, but I cannot. Turgid in texture, its emotion delivered as a kind of screeching (think bad Scriabin), the work needed (and, fortunately, got) a Mozart concerto afterward to clear the air. Guess which deserved, and drew, the most applause.

**December 5:** Donald Crockett's excellent Thornton Contemporary Music Ensemble at USC introduces Naomi Sekiya's nicely energetic *Arachnid Dance* for guitar and strings, two works by Uzbekistan-born Australian Elena Kats-Chernin, and some time-wasting stuff by Gerald Levinson (whose deplorable Second Symphony, played here in 1995, left scars not yet healed). Kats-Chernin's *Clocks* runs a fantastic array of audible color (percussion, brass, a saxophone) over an insistent metronomic banging, even better are some of her ragtime pieces that Vicki Ray played at the last "Piano Spheres" concert.

**December 4:** Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Dichotomie*, one of the products of his sabbatical from the Philharmonic podium, draws a capacity crowd to Zipper for the season's second "Green Umbrella," but Jonathan Harvey's *Song Offerings* is even more worth the trip: settings of misty Tagore poetry with a solo voice (the marvelous Elissa Johnston) engulfed in radiance from the Steven Stacky-led chamber ensemble's microtones and distant showers of sparks. Salonen's 19-minute piece, two movements of pianistic glitter — Ravel here, John Adams' *Phrygian Gates* there — is slight of substance against, say, the *L.A. Variations*, but enormously attractive, and is gorgeously played by Gloria Cheng (using half-gloves some of the time to enable palm-of-the-hand gissandos). Lou Harrison's *Grand Duo*, which began the program, would have given off more charm at half the length. Harry Partch's *Barstow* gained nothing from string players and baritone John Schneider in hobo attire: the wrong music in the wrong setting.

**November 30, December 3:** In an interesting coincidence, the two works that bracket Kurt Weill's mid-career crisis are given here back to back, the ballet-with-song *The Seven Deadly Sins* of 1934 — his last European work (and his last collaboration with Bertolt Brecht) — and *The Eternal Road*, the biblical/political pageant that brought him to New York to work on Max Reinhardt's 1937 Broadway production. Still afixz from their Mahler the week before, Zubin Mehta and the Philharmonic deliver the *Sins* in a smashing, eloquent reading of Weill's purple orchestration, with the winds playing — as required — as if with garlic on their breath. Sheri Greenawald's in-your-face delivery is a little overwrought for Brecht's slashing satire, but the guys of the Hudson Shad Quartet steal the show. Pre-concert, they had sung, enchantingly, a half-hour of Weill's theater music.

At Brentwood's University Synagogue, with its iffy acoustics, the enterprising Noreen Green and her Los Angeles Jewish Symphony produce more than an hour's worth of Weill's hauntingly beautiful *Eternal Road* music, its first hearing here since a Hollywood Bowl performance led by Franz Waxman over 50 years ago. It comes over despite some woolly work from an overlarge chorus and despite Green's own not-quite-eloquent translation of Franz Werfel's German text. (Among the LAJS's previous accomplishments, I'm told: Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* in Yiddish.) Onstage as between-the-scenes narrator there's the veteran actor Dick Van Patten, who as Dickie Van Patten had played the boy Isaac in the 1937 original: a nice existential touch.

**November 27:** LACMA's second "Focus on California" concert honors the refugees who turned the area into a German cultural colony (complete with its own pastry shop, Benes on West Third, which endures). There was nothing the least bit warmed by the local sun in Hanns Eisler's 1943 Third Piano Sonata, which Leonard Stein played earnestly; how could there be, when Eisler's only truly California-inspired work was a set of songs vividly detailing his hatred for the place? Schoenberg's String Trio of 1945, his last major 12-tone work and as eloquent a statement as any of the expressive power of that style, could have taken shape in pre-Hitler Berlin. Ernst Krenek's *Aulokithara* of 1971, originally composed for oboe, harp and orchestra, and dolled up a year later by transferring the orchestral accompaniment to what passed for electronic sounds ("whoosh-whoosh, plink-

plank") at the time, could have been anyone's overextended academic exercise, anywhere in the world, anytime from 1930 on. That leaves Ingolf Dahl's 1946 *Concerto a Tré* as the evening's one unmitigated charmer, as though old Benes himself had been standing at the door handing out his renowned *Apfelstrudel*. Another delight is the high quality of performance, from the iconic Stein, the string players Maiko Kawabata, David Walther and William Skeen; David Sherr (ambulating through Krenek's prescribed stageful of oboes in a vain search for interesting music); harpist Amy Wilkins; and the smiling clarinetist Gary Gray, whose smile rubs off onto Dahl's piece and becomes a positive gleam.

**MEANWHILE, BACK ON BUNKER HILL:** An audience's collective tear ducts in the fourth act are the sure-fire litmus for any *La Bohème* performance; on opening night, from a well-located seat in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, I detect nary a sniffle. The Herbert Ross production, first seen in 1993, is especially admirable for the way it leaves room for a properly chosen cast to behave as recognizable human participants in a human drama. No such luck this time, however. The idea may have been a good one, to cast the opera with young unknowns, but we get a shrill, squally Rodolfo in Aquiles Machado, tenor-shaped in the blobby, old-fashioned way so that Herb Ross' plan for his fourth-act entrance, riding a bicycle, is out of the question. (He merely pushes it on.)

Leontina Vaduva's Mimi lacks spirit, tone or even proper respect for pitch — fashioned, in other words, from the same tattered fabric as her Marguerite in last season's *Faust*. Earle Patriarco's Marcello, a company debut, also seems cut from common cloth; Eric Owens' Colline and Malcolm MacKenzie's Schaunard are, so to speak, just there. That leaves Inva Mula's Musetta to steal hearts and, indeed, the whole show — as she had in the 1997 revival — during her few moments onstage, and to make at least those moments worth the \$148 that the company believes such second-rate entertainment should be garnering at the box office. On the podium is William Vendice, the company's chorus master and head of musical staff — but hardly the torchbearer to make these proceedings burst into flame. Plácido Domingo, an old and trustworthy *Bohème* hand, will conduct this weekend's performance (December 16 matinee). That *has* to be an improvement. □

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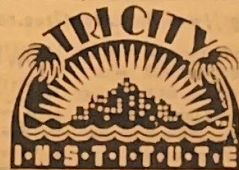
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