



Innovations from the Paul Dresher Ensemble

June 5, 2010 • SF Classical Music Examiner • Stephen Smoliar

The Paul Dresher Ensemble has involved different combinations of performers for different occasions; but the name they chose for last night's Old First Concerts recital (which will be repeated at 4 PM on Sunday afternoon) at Old First Church made for a bit of a mouthful. For this event they billed themselves as The Paul Dresher Ensemble Double Duo, connoting (correctly) that this group was the result of a "merger." Dresher's own duo was his partnership with percussionist Joel Davel, and the other pairing involved violinist Karen Bentley Pollick with pianist Lisa Moore. As it turned out, the program offered one solo, three duets, one trio, and one quartet. Furthermore, Dresher included two composers, Martin Bresnick and Sam Adams, to share the program with his own compositions, which covered his work between 1990 and 2006.



Joel Davel, Lisa Moore, Karen Bentley Pollick, and Paul Dresher

As both composer and performer, Dresher has a wide variety of interests that inform his own innovative activities. "Double Ikat," whose second (of two) parts opened the program, is a representative example of how influence leads to creation. In this case the influence was Lou Harrison's "Varied Trio" as performed by the trio of violinist David Abel, pianist Julie Steinberg, and percussionist William Winant. Harrison's composition, in turn, is one of many that reflected his interest in Indonesian music, particularly that performed by gamelan; and Dresher's title refers to a particular approach to weaving that one finds in Indonesia (as well as many other countries around the world, according to its Wikipedia entry). For Dresher, Harrison's Indonesian influences became a point of departure, from which he progressed through a synthesis of styles, resulting in what he called "my most blatantly lyrical work to date." This work was the trio on the program, with Davel adding percussion to the Pollick-Moore duo.

In the second half of the program, the duo performed strictly as a duo for Dresher's *Elapsed Time*, which, like "Double Ikat," had been composed for Abel and Steinberg. Also like "Double Ikat" it is music that progresses through the unfolding of repeated forms that evolve through their repetitions. In this case the inspiration was Dresher's "teenage obsession with top fuel drag racing;" and its three movements are entitled "Variations," "Almost," "Racer." As one might suspect, the first two movements prepare the listener for the "long sprint" of the final movement; and the result is a fascinating example of how a logic that is usually applied to dynamics can be transferred over to rhythmic progression.

Pollick and Moore also performed Bresnick's "Bird as Prophet," the last of twelve pieces collected in the set *Opere della Musica Povera* (Works of a Poor Music). The title comes from the seventh of the nine piano pieces by Robert Schumann collected under the title *Waldscenen*, making this one of the more intriguing celebrations of the bicentennial of Schumann's birth. Whether Schumann's bird was actually prophesying or the composer simply needed a justification for the eccentricities of his arpeggiated passages, Bresnick seems to have interpreted the work as an invitation to listen more closely to nature. In that respect his own path may be closer to Olivier Messiaen than to Schumann, but there were passages in the violin part that indicated that Bresnick's ear was even more carefully attuned to subtleties of birdsong than Messiaen's had been. In his remarks before the performance, he also suggested the presence of another "Bird," that being Charlie Parker; but that probably involved an influence of spirit, rather than substance.

Continued on other side

Moore also performed a solo work that she commissioned from Sam Adams, "Piano Step." Adams' remarks suggested that he conceived this composition as a dance, where each hand of the pianist was one of the dancers. This entailed an approach to performance involving a "relationship between 'sound-production' and 'sound-reaction,'" which made for an innovative way of thinking about the keyboard. On first exposure, however, this seemed to be an idea that worked better in theory than in practice; and I have to confess that the idea of the two hands as interacting agents eluded me for most of the composition. Nevertheless, it made for an interesting experiment that was short enough not to overstay its welcome.

The two remaining works on the program, both by Drescher, brought all the electronic equipment that filled the stage into play. For as long as I have been listening to his music, I have enjoyed Drescher's appreciation of the complementary roles that technology can play in the course of performance, those of synthesis and control. This was particularly evident in Davel's performances on Marimba Lumina. As the program notes explained, this is "a dynamically sensitive electronic mallet controller," which means that, functionally, it is a *control interface* that exploits the skills of a marimba player. *What* is controlled, however, is strictly a matter of the software on the other side of the interface; so the conception and selection of synthesis software becomes part of the composition process. Thus, in "Chorale Times Two" (which is the second movement of Drescher's 1997 concerto for violin and electro-acoustic band), the Marimba Lumina provides the "band's" percussion section; but that section is extended to include an additional vocabulary of sampled sounds. "Glimpsed From Afar," on the other hand, unites the Marimba Lumina with a Quadrachord, an enormous (160 inches long) frame supporting four strings of identical length but different gauges and an elaborate configuration of pickup and synthesis technology. In this case the Marimba Lumina software is controlling the Quadrachord hardware as well as software for its own sounds; and, for the second half of the composition, Davel left the Marimba Lumina interface, spending the rest of his time sharing the space along the length of the Quadrachord with Drescher. This dance was far more literal than the metaphorical conception of Adams' "Piano Step;" and watching it unfold was as exciting as any of the best of the modern dance repertoire. Also, as had been the case with "Elapsed Time," there was a clear sense of an accumulation of energy that climaxed with a chord that enjoyed a sustained (and dazzling) reverberation (during which the appreciative audience dutifully withheld applause). Taken together, both "Chorale Times Two" and "Glimpsed From Afar" provided excellent (and complementary) examples of just how expressive (in semantics as appropriate to the nineteenth century as they are today) electronic technology can be in the service of music; and this is probably the major reason why I continue to find Drescher one of the most interesting among the current scene of active composers.