

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

NOVEMBER 11, 2004

LEISURE & ARTS

A World of Music From One Man

By Barrymore Laurence Scherer

New York

Tomorrow, The Paul Dresher Ensemble celebrates its 20th anniversary with its Carnegie Hall debut. The program is part of the innovative "In Your Ear" festival (through Sunday), curated by Carnegie's composer-in-chief, John Adams, in Carnegie's Zankel Hall.

Mr. Dresher, 53, has long been known for his edgy musical diversity, composing operas, chamber and orchestral compositions and scores for theater, dance and film that reflect his exceptionally wide-ranging tastes—ranging from Bach to Jimi Hendrix, and beyond. His program features works from his new CD, "Cage Machine" (New Albion Records). Ironically, this all-Dresher concert departs from his usual programming. Known for his collegial generosity, Mr. Dresher—and his ensemble, including the Electro-Acoustic Band—usually mingles his work with new and recent compositions by such other composers as Terry Riley, Eve Beglarian, Anthony Davis and David Lang. "As much

THE PAUL DRESHER ENSEMBLE

Carnegie Hall
Tomorrow

as I love my own music, I love other people's music too," he observes. "That's what interests me."

Musically, Mr. Dresher has been like a boy in a candy shop since his childhood in Los Angeles, where his father taught part time at UCLA and often brought him to concerts at Arnold Schoenberg Hall there. Classical piano lessons began at age seven, but it was lessons in music theory that gave him the first inkling that "I had a proclivity for music." After a final piano recital at 13—which included a Beethoven sonata and a boogie-woogie transcription of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee"—Mr. Dresher switched to guitar. "The first time I picked up the instrument I fell in love." He also fell in love with the whole rock scene of the late '60s while maintaining his keen interest in classical music, especially contemporary works.

Although his composition teachers, at UC Berkeley and San Diego, "premised that there was a strong boundary between classical and popular music, they were not doctrinaire," and Mr. Dresher often pushed up against that boundary as a composer, continually seeking unity in his happy eclecticism. "I've always had a profoundly emotional response to diverse music," he says, "from different periods, different cultural and aesthetic contexts. So part of my goal has been to find the thread that ties them together."

Not surprisingly, the works on his new CD, composed between 1994 and 2002, exemplify his continued intellectual harvesting. For instance, Concerto for Violin and Electro-Acoustic Band, performed by



Paul Dresher

violinist David Abel and the band, is in two movements strikingly disparate in style at first hearing—the jazzy, jagged and menacing "Cage Machine," and "Chorale Times Two," a haunting episode of deliciously lyrical melancholia.

Mr. Dresher acknowledges that he sometimes performs the movements separately. But both are closely linked by an almost identical instrumental palette, and by their thematic material, drawn from samples from John Cage's epochal Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano. "Here are two radically different worlds created from the same sounds," notes Mr. Dresher, "from that unique body of sound created by Cage, each different from one another; and both different from Cage's own sonic world."

Mr. Dresher founded the Electro-Acoustic Band in 1993 to realize his wholehearted belief "in a new chamber music that integrates electronic media." Moreover, he chooses players whose experience embraces rock, jazz and world music as well as the classical European tradition. Thus, when Mr. Dresher plays a guitar solo in the final section of "Din of Iniquity" "against a piano part with pounding chords that should be Jerry Lee Lewis, my players need no explanation." Nor do they need an explanation for the section of "Double Ikat," where the violin line is played in the sliding manner of

Hindustani music. "It's already in their fingers," he says.

The three-movement "Elapsed Time," for violin and piano, stems in part from Mr. Dresher's interest in "how the nature of musical development (or lack thereof) affects our sense of the passage of time." It was also partly inspired by Mr. Dresher's youthful obsession with drag racing, and partly by Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. "I have never stopped marveling at what Bach could do with that simple 32-bar theme," he says, "and I often use the 'Goldberg' as a touchstone to determine how far I can go with something without losing its recognizable backbone." The work's high-octane finale, "Racer," evokes the spinning, repetition of Minimalism, its rhythmic zip derived from compound meters. "I've always been fascinated by compound meters, whether it's the 18/16 against 3/4 variation of the 'Goldberg' [No. 26] or one of those wonderful compound-meter improvisations by The Grateful Dead. When I studied West African music I was fascinated by what you can accomplish with a simple 3 against 2, 4 against 3, 6 against 8. And out of that grew my desire to do something virtuosic with it."

In addition to composition, Mr. Dresher has perpetuated the experimentation of such composers as Harry Partch, Lou Harrison and the iconic Mr. Cage, and invented his own instruments. His latest is the Quadrachord. With four 160-inch strings and an electronic bass pickup next to each of its two bridges, the Quadrachord can be plucked like a guitar, played like a slide guitar, bowed like a cello, or hammered with mallets. It is featured in Mr. Dresher's hypnotically atmospheric "In the Name(less)," along with the Marimba Lumina, an electronic MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) percussion controller designed by Californian Don Buchla. Played like a marimba, with mallets, it doesn't produce its own sounds, but controls and manipulates the expansive sounds of the Quadrachord "in ways that cannot be done by any other instrument," according to Mr. Dresher.

Verbal descriptions do this music scant justice. So either get yourself a copy of the CD or get yourself down to Carnegie's Zankel Hall tomorrow at 7:30 p.m.

Mr. Scherer writes on classical music for the Journal.