

# THE BIG CITY

Music, mores and more...

## Real Americans

By George Grella | December 2, 2009

The American Composers Orchestra brought a handful of firsts into Zankel Hall on Tuesday evening; their first concert of the season, their first time under the baton of Stefan Lano, how himself was making his Carnegie debut. And the program featured four first pieces; the New York premiere of one work and the world premieres of three others. And it all began with music from the 'first' American composer, Charles Ives. [...]

The final piece, and final premiere, was Donal Fox's "*Peace Out*," a concerto for an improvising pianist, with the composer at the keys. **This is a real gem of a piece, modest in duration but terrifically ambitious in tone and technique and in this performance a complete success.** Fox matched Ives in the sense of Americanness of the music, and his is a modern updating, with a toughness, swagger and jaunty humor that is very much a part of post World War II American culture.

The work opens with an intense riff in the right hand of the piano, music which recalls Conlon Nancarrow. When the orchestra joins, the bracing excitement continues. Fox keeps the soloist and ensemble very close to each other, responding immediately and almost antagonistically to each other. The pace is fast, the harmonies pungent and the motion of the music is angular yet not harsh. It's a kind of Romantic Modernism, highly expressive and even agitated, yet transparent and open about its directions. It's reminiscent of the last movement of the Barber piano concerto, with the piano banging out clusters up and down the keys, but it's even more aggressive, impassioned and exciting, especially the relentless interjections from the bass, drum and tuba which threaten to beat the music into a halt.

Fox builds the second section from a bass line developed out of Charlie Parker's "*Now's The Time*," and it's a pleasure to hear the fragment and an even greater pleasure to hear the imagination and craft Fox uses in forming it into a propulsive, hip foundation. He's done something that many have tried and few have succeeded at, which is taking identifiable elements of jazz and make an utterly classical music out of them. **There's no stiffness, condescension, nothing arch or cute, it's the work of a composer who knows jazz and has learned from it but has no intention of turning an orchestra into a jazz band,** on par with Stravinsky's "*Ebony Concerto*." While he has an excellent, idiomatic blues wail for the orchestra, he doesn't ask them to sound like a combo or a swing band. The music breaths with its own harmonies and own internal sense of rhythm. It also doesn't depend on an improviser to carry the music, it speaks for itself.

**Fox is a fabulous pianist with sharp, confident technique and a real idea of what he wants to do,** and it appears that he does improvise in short phrases during the course of the first two sections. Again, what he adds is completely idiomatic to the piece itself, seamless in the overall expression and language. The pianist has the most room to improvise in a cadenza which comes prior to the third, and last, section, and Fox maintained his fine balance between jazz information and classical structure and language. His ability to convey ideas and emotions within the limitation of his own structure was deeply impressive — while a jazz musician might use a tune as a foundation from which to break free, Fox used the material of his piece to build and focus his improvisation, just as a Mozart concerto would ask.

After the intensity of this music, the final section began quietly, from a held note on the keyboard, and was a simple, lovely lament over a delicate tremolo in the violas. Beginning in extreme activity, the music became so simple as to leave the impression of repose and reconciliation, which fit well with the sense of controlled outrage, even fury, in the preceding music.

Superb playing by the orchestra in a challenging piece, and **some of the finest composition and improvisation I've heard in recent memory.**