

CUBE Calendar, January-February, 2005

Janice Misurell-Mitchell, "Berlin Diary II"

Janice Misurell-Mitchell: Berlin Diary II

The fall was filled with a wide variety of music, such as another Staats Oper performance, this time of Franz Schrecker's *Der ferne Klang* (The Distant Sound), an unusual program by the Deutsches Sinfonie Orchester, a fall jazzfest, and several new music concerts in a variety of venues.

The new music scene is relatively healthy, though composers complained that there is a need for a major contemporary music ensemble in Berlin itself, rather than the many visiting groups that appear there. Chicago composer Guillermo Gregorio, originally from Argentina, had his works featured in a concert series, "der negative horizont" (the negative horizon), presented at Podewil, a major performance space for alternative art in Berlin. Gregorio's pieces included the premiere of *Otra Música 4* for 5 instruments and live electronics, and two works based on graphic notation. The series, which ran from September 30 to October 2, featured several visual and sound artists from Argentina and included panel discussions, conceptual and experimental art, electroacoustic music, and film.

The Konzerthaus Berlin Musikclub is a cabaret within the concert house building, and it has a nineteenth century atmosphere. Trio Nexus (flute, percussion and piano), presented a concert there that was comprised entirely of premieres by composers in Berlin. Programmed by Gabriel Iranyi, who was originally from Rumania, the music fit a range of compositional styles. I met and spoke at length with Gabriel, flutist Erik Drescher (who had played on the Podewil concert), and Helmut Zapf, another composer on the program. All three are actively involved in the programming and production of recently written music in Berlin.

The following week I went to the Ars-nova-ensemble Berlin, directed by Peter Schwarz. The church where the concert was held had wonderful acoustics; the entire concert was a cappella, and the blend, intonation, and overall singing was a thrill to listen to. There was a sound-oriented piece, *Litene* by Peteris Vasks and *12 Bussverse* by Alfred Schnittke. Another concert, "Music Unerhörte" (music never before heard) was in a club somewhat like the HotHouse, only smaller. It was produced by Helmut Zapf, who also directed the performing group, Ensemble Junge Musik. Most of the pieces were by composers in their twenties, and they were very impressive in their grasp of instrumental possibilities. There was a good-sized audience and a lot of networking after the concert.

The Deutsches Symphonie Orchester, directed by Kent Nagano, presented a daring program (for an established orchestra) in Philharmonic Hall. (The featured soloist was Finnish pianist Olli Mustonen.) A mix of old and new, the pieces on the concert all shared the concept of “sinfonia”. On the first half of the concert were canzoni by Gabrieli, several keyboard sinfonias by Bach, and Webern’s *Symphonie opus 21*. These works were played in alternation: Gabrieli, Bach, Webern, Bach, Gabrieli—all without pause. Following these was Stravinsky’s *Concerto for Piano and Winds*; the sounds of the previous pieces resonated brilliantly in the Stravinsky. Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5* completed the program; for me the biggest thrill was the performance and the personnel of the wind instruments: the principal flute, oboe and bassoon were all women (as was one of the bass trombones!); and their playing and blend were superb.

The Schrecker opera contained music that was expressionist but had many twists and turns including some popular styles as well, It was directed by Peter Mussbach, who had created the version of *Moses und Aron* described in the previous *Calendar*. Taking the story of the composer-seeker and the beloved who is left behind, Mussbach added a visual subtext of sexual abuse and hysteria. The opera was thus complicated in even more interesting ways.

I also went to several jazz performances, including two full evenings (four hour concerts) of jazz/new music at the new Berliner Gallerie. These performances were dedicated to the late American performers, Steve Lacy (who died recently), and Eric Dolphy (who died in Berlin in 1964). The Dolphy concert featured bass clarinetist Harry Sparnaay, who often performs in Chicago, as well as clarinetists Armand Angster and Vinny Golia. The Gallerie, which had opened three weeks earlier, was available to concert patrons the entire evening, and during intermissions many people wandered through the new museum. Most of the audience of 250 people stayed for the music until the very end.