

The Boston Globe

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CLASSICAL NOTES

June 25, 2010

Giving voice to a century

The 20th century was, among many other things, the time when America finally got itself on the classical music map. There had, of course, been composers in America earlier, but it was only in the last century that the country produced not just a handful of composers largely beholden to their European colleagues for inspiration, but a great assembly of voices and factions offering different — and sometimes competing — visions of what American music was.

Despite the importance of this remarkable chapter in music history, conductor Scott Parkman thinks we haven't been listening closely enough. Parkman formed American Century Music last year out of a conviction that despite the lasting prominence of American art in some media — film, television, jazz — its art music has yet to be examined in any sustained depth. Under his direction, the organization intends to produce concerts devoted solely to 20th-century American music. Its first is today in the courtyard of the Boston Public Library.

Parkman was trained as both a conductor and a percussionist, and his training, he wrote in an email exchange, focused heavily on the core European repertoire. “However, I’ve been curious for some time as to why early and mid-20th century American composers’ music rarely appears in concert halls,” he wrote, mentioning William Schuman, Roger Sessions, David Diamond, and Walter Piston. “The repertoire by [these] composers is enormous, lots of it very good, and much of it underperformed.” It’s true that recordings and isolated performances of many of these pieces exist; however, Parkman wrote, “I’m more interested in live performance and putting together interesting programs that allow the different compositional voices of the century to communicate.”

As an example of that conversation, today’s concert is composed of wind music by New England composers, written between the early 1940s and the mid-1950s. Arthur Berger’s neoclassical Quartet for Winds sits in close proximity to the jazzy atonality of Donald Martino’s “A Set for Clarinet.” The program is rounded out by quintets by Walter Piston and Amy Beach.

American Century Music has no fixed roster of musicians, and, Parkman explained, is wedded to no particular musical format. Rather, he wrote, “it is designed to work with many different musicians as well as collaborate with established ensembles, orchestras, and performing arts centers. Thus, ACM has the capacity to perform the entire gamut of repertoire, with programs that can present a concert of a singular genre or those combining several different ones.”

If that sounds like an ambitious plan, consider that Parkman has already scheduled two more BPL concerts this summer — one featuring music of Piston, Elliott Carter, and George Antheil (July 16), the other composed of string quartets by Barber, Ives, and Arthur Foote (Aug. 20). A performance at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington is scheduled for Nov. 14. And Parkman hopes to expand the organization’s reach to include educational activities as well.

www.americancenturymusic.org

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