

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT: MUSIC REVIEW

Ensembles unite at festival to pay tribute to mix of Latina composers

By Michael Cameron | Special to the Tribune

November 20, 2007 Gender parity in contemporary creative arts is a distant but visible goal in most genres. On the classical composition stage, the gains have been incremental at best, and in the world of Latin music, the imbalance seems even more acute.

A concert Sunday at Gottlieb Hall in Chicago's Merit School of Music sought to highlight the disparity with works by eight Latina composers. Since the other six concerts in the Latino Music Festival are exclusively the province of male composers, the point was set in stark relief.

Such exclusive division by sex is a legitimate subject for debate, but no one could accuse the CUBE and MAVerick Ensembles of promoting restrictive stylistic ghettos. Every conceivable permutation from folk/pop influence to pure European modernism was represented in this musical feijoada.

Vernacular strains were most evident in the bookend works. Brazilian Clarice Assad's jazz-tinged "Pole to Pole" worked best in sections that evoked a cool, noir sensibility. The quicker spots featured hand claps and vocalisms by some of the players, but this premiere performance never quite settled into a convincing groove. Venezuelan Adina Izarra's captivating "Dos Miniaturas Medievales" for clarinet and piano also leaned heavily on syncopated rhythms, framed with open modal harmonies.

At the other end of the spectrum was the elegantly crafted "Metamorfosis" for solo guitar by Mexican-born London resident Hilda Paredes. The only hint of Latin origins was the instrument -- otherwise it was an exemplar of precise, studiously atonal modernism, performed with subtle, detailed precision by James Bauer.

The most familiar name was Cuban native Tania Leon, represented here by "A la Par" for piano and percussion. This formidable work has the occasional hint of Afro-Caribbean syncopations and a percussion array with Latin flavors. Nothing in the harmonies betrayed popular roots, but its raw, sculpted edge gave it a potent lift.

The song cycle "Epitafios y Otras Muertes" by Ana Lara was accessible but not simple-minded; it provided a showcase for Levi Hernandez's dulcet, mellow baritone.

Pianist Philip Morehead also gave touching accounts of three charming salon pieces by Brazilian pioneer Chiquinha Gonzaga.

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