



Everything Alabama

Karen Bentley Pollick: Virtuosity of the avant garde

By Michael Huebner -- The Birmingham News

March 11, 2010, 9:40PM

KAREN BENTLEY POLLICK: ALTERNATING CURRENTS

Thursday, Birmingham Museum of Art

Five stars out of five

Invariably, a program of modern music will contain one or two works that won't stand the test of time -- they will be performed once or twice and never again. For the eight pieces on "Alternating Currents," violinist Karen Bentley Pollick assured that wouldn't happen.

Rarely will a recital such as this engage the ear from beginning to end, yet each piece at Birmingham Museum of Art event had a unique style and temperament, reflecting Pollick's keen sense for gleaning quality in experimental music and giving these scores their rightful due.

A common denominator in all but one piece was electronics, hence the program's title. Two speakers belted out sounds ranging from vaguely recognizable to incomprehensible, flighty to otherworldly. Pollick's role was to complement, contrast and expound on them.

Michael Angell's "Capital Spheres" created a menagerie of repetitive bleeps and ethereal sounds, extending the sonic range of a piano while Pollick accompanied on amplified violin. David Jaffe's half-human, half-machine evocations in "Impossible Animals" could be mournful, frightful or funny. Based on synthesized voices and a recorded winter wren, it tweeted, warbled and created new creatures in the imagination, the scales and arcing vocal glissandos sometimes resembling Chinese opera.

Brian Moon continued the animal theme by electronically manipulating the howls and growls of a stray dog who has taken up residence at Pollick's home. Charles Norman Mason's intricate sonic weavings in "Metaman" brought an grainy video by Sheri Wills into focus. Dorothy Hindman introduced her "Fantasia for Karen Alone," a slowly unfolding dialogue with a recorded violin in pointillistic plucks and snaps and high-pitched harmonics. Zack Browning used highly-charged sound masses in broad swashes to bring "Sole Injection" to an intense conclusion.

The only acoustic piece on the program, Dan Tepfer's sultry "Solo Blues" is a duo for a single performer. A remarkable feat for both composer and performer, it showcased Pollick's unique ability to play the violin with one hand and the piano with the other.

To some, the works on "Alternating Currents" might not be music at all. To those following the thread of the avant garde through the tame apologies of post-modernism, there was no denying these composers' skill and vision. Pollick not only extended that thread, she vitalized and emboldened it. An audience in Seattle will have a say in the matter when she repeats the program there on March 19.

mhuebner@bhamnews.com

© 2010 al.com. All rights reserved.



Karen Bentley Pollick