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ARTS & FILMS

More good things from Alea III

REVIEW | MUSIC

ALEA III - Theodore Antoniou, music director, in music of Thorne, Chowning, Perle, Stravinsky, and Del Tredici, Saturday night at the Longy School, Cambridge.

By Richard Buell
Globe Correspondent

Another newsy mix of contemporary music from Theodore Antoniou's Alea III ensemble. Performing media ranged from no humans whatever (John Chowning's "Turenas," a computer-generated tape piece developed at Stanford University's Center for Artificial Intelligence) to an entire stageful of them (David Del Tredici's "Vintage Alice.")

A wide range of audience responses was allowed for. The "pay strict attention and see how the rule-book is made to sound" esthetic was represented, and so was the "relax and let it roll over you" point of view. A pleasant thing about Alea III is that its umbrella - held upside down, it seems - takes in so much.

An impression that got nailed home (the composer doing it all himself) is that the "cafeteria" style of composition - which seemed so daring, so spacy, so free ten years ago - has begun to date terribly. "Vintage Alice" (1972) is the third of the pieces in which David Del Tredici applies his magpie stylistic virtuosity to texts from "Alice in Wonderland," pushing the performers (as usual) to hysterical, fatiguing extremes. An ensemble that includes saxophones, mandolin, accordion, amplified soprano voice - speaking, singing, screaming - first marches off

free-associating in one direction, then another, then another, until you realize there is no direction. The performance had the right cute-nasty tone. Judith Kellock's handling of the rather dangerous-sounding vocal writing was especially impressive.

"From the Dying Earth" (1979) by Nicholas Thorne, the youngest composer on the program (28), seemed a genuinely poetic piece of music - poetic in the graphically evocative-representational manner we hear in Ives and Deltus. Thorne knows how to make a small orchestra teem and swarm and murmur. It's not static music, however; it's pretty canny about moving on from one sonorous texture to another (pacing the attention), even at suggesting - to these ears, at least; see title - what may have been geological striations. Apart from a slight tendency to oversweetness, it made for a pleasant set of emanations.

George Perle's Concertino for piano, winds, and timpani (1974) you could call a kind of motoristic toccata - with the solo piano at the wheel - that sometimes slows down when the ambient instrumental mass gets more interesting. It uses 12-tone elements as condiment and is rhetorically shapely and well-spoken; quite a fetching piece. Janice Weber performed it well. For the rest, John Chowning's witty, un-sterile computer piece "Turenas" (1972) made a much stronger impression than in Sanders half a dozen years ago. Pianists Martin Amlin and Janice Weber rather dulled the content of some Stravinsky "easy" pieces from 1915 and 1917 - more edge, coolness, sarcasm please. But Alea III did have us caring about it.