

Encounters 2: imaginative success

Encounters Music Series
Concert No. 2
Convocation Hall
Sunday Nov. 3

review by John Charles

Another richly imaginative concert, with widely contrasting kinds of music and performing forces, was heard in the Encounters series. What was the unspoken connection between these works, that made them add up so well?

Perhaps it was song: the late 19th century songs of Hugo Wolf, the wordless songs of sea creatures in George Crumb's *Voice of the Whale*, the endlessly songful melodies of Schubert's *Octet*. Certainly all three composers communicated with the directness of song in these pieces.

Another thread is the continuity of composers — the dialogue across the years that their music represents.

Wolf probably first came across the Swabian poet Morike through his love for Schumann's song settings. But he became feverishly obsessed with Morike's poems in 1888 on his own, and from February to May he set nearly 50 of this poet's works — sometimes three a day.

Schubert's great *Octet* of 1824 was carefully modelled after Beethoven's *Septet*, which in turn, is modelled after earlier composers' *Divertimenti*.

And Crumb's work of 1971, based on tapes of the songs of humpbacked whales, follows Alan Hovhannas' *And God Created Whales* — a work employing actual whale tapes and orchestra — by a year.

The program opened with seven of Wolf's *Morike Lieder*, sung by baritone Harold Wiens. These are highly sophisticated songs with an astonishing range of mood, and Wiens chose relatively calm ones.

Extreme emotions were included, such as the bewilderment of the young lovers, in

Never-Sated Love, who bit each other's lips until they hurt; and the cheerfulness of *Journey on Foot*, with the narrator feeling the joy of Adam on the first day of Creation. But these are not among Wolf's most tempest-tossed settings, and the two songs describing paintings of the Virgin Mary are rapt in their stillness. Best of all was *Obscurity*, with its beautiful chromatic piano chords, as the singer asks to be left alone by an uncaring world.

Wiens sang all seven with a simple straightforwardness, his hands at his side. If one can imagine more artful interpretation — a shaded word here, a gesture there — which might reveal something we hadn't noticed, still there were no mannerisms to get between us and the song. Wiens' voice was firm and lovely, especially in the middle register, through there was a bit of strain when he held notes in high passages.

Robert Stangeland's handling of the elaborate and sometimes independent accompaniments, was technically impressive and reasonably sensitive, though occasionally dry and mechanical.

American composer George Crumb, now 56, has a marvelously dramatic and theatrical sense of what modern music can be, and *Vox Balaenae/Voice of the Whale* (1971) is a vivid example. It's written for three masked performers, who play electric instruments — flute, cello and piano. And Crumb asks that they play in a deep blue light, to suggest an under-the-sea eeriness, which is perfectly mirrored in the 20-minute work.

Greenpeaceniks would love it, but Encounters emcee Christopher Lewis rightly pointed out that Crumb's concerns are "philosophical, not ecological."

Crumb was profoundly disturbed by the Vietnam War. His string quartet *Black Angels* dramatizes the struggle between God and Devil, and the score is dated: "Finished in a time of war." Thus Crumb is repeatedly concerned with what man is doing to himself, and his music is filled with images of death, broken rituals, and alternate systems such as magic and numerology.

Crumb's explorations of sound are what make him such an impressive composer, for every sound is specific, and surrounded by silence. This work began with the flutist (Marc Stocker) playing into the open grand piano, so his sound reverberated off the piano strings, creating an echo that is one of Crumb's favorite devices.

Pianist Alfred Fisher plucked the piano strings at times, while cellist Mark Eeles thrummed his instrument like a huge sitar (an instrument Crumb employed in later works), or brought forth slithering tones. Throughout Crumb evokes a rippling motion in various ways, which contributes to the oceanic mood.

All the fiendishly difficult techniques are there to express something tragic about the interaction of man with earth's other creatures. And Crumb's ability to suggest the eternal nature of the sea makes it a very moving work.

There were a few technical problems in this Western Canadian premiere, which mattered not a whit. All three artists performed nobly.

Schubert's *Octet* is always described as his sunniest chamber work — quite an accomplishment when he was dying of syphilis, and the works before and after the *Octet* are tragic. But the work is shot through with melancholy, and I've seldom felt the darkness of the work's *Adagio* so clearly as in this concert. The problem was that the whole work took on a solemn air, that seemed more a result of wrestling with 60 minutes of notes than a conscious interpretation.

It was, overall, an impressive performance. Clarinetist Dennis Prime is highly expressive, and added a great deal of poetry to the event. Violinist Norman Nelson's tone is sweet and strong, and these two made much of their duets. And the give and take of chamber playing was often smooth, though not consistently. There were notable solos by cellist Colin Ryan and bassoonist William Harrison. And Jan Urk, on the double bass, tied things together admirably, playing with the proper firm, cleanly-phrased touch.

But the whole work sounded a bit heavy. Tempi were sometimes too leisurely, as in the opening movement, or the theme and variations which seemed unusually meandering. The wonderfully bouncy *Scherzo* was a bit dour, and the final movement was taken at a hectic pace, which didn't sound joyous at all.

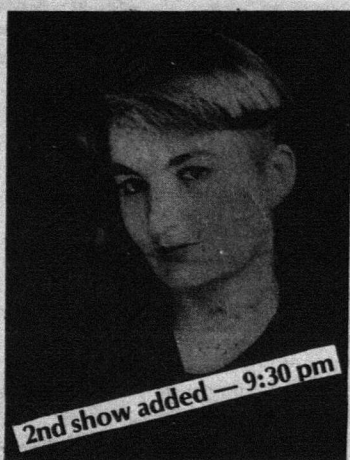
There's no place I'd rather have been than listening to Schubert, but I was very aware of the work's length, and in a properly proportioned performance that wouldn't be the case.

The next Encounters concert is January 18, with works by Brahms, Schonberg, and Bartok on the program.

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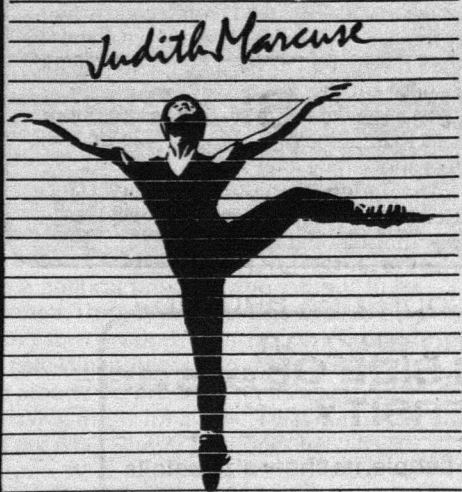


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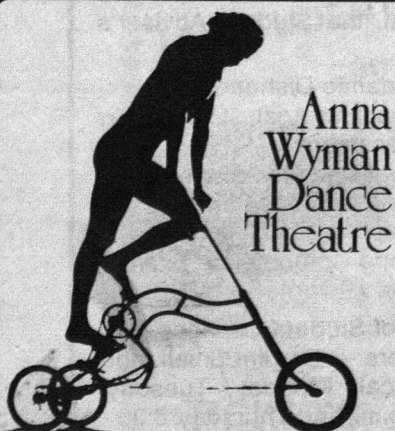
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The ordeal of infertility

Ashes
 Studio Theatre
 til November 16

review by Rosa Jackson

The third year BFA drama students performing in *Ashes* at Studio Theatre must be congratulated on their handling of an avant-garde play on a touchy subject: infertility.

David Rudkin's play begins with a scene in which the two leading characters, Colin and Anne Harding, try, literally, to make a baby. When all their efforts fail, they seek medical advice, but soon come to wonder at what their situation has been reduced to: sperm samples sent through the mail in padded envelopes, alkaline douches, charts, and frequent cold baths are all part of what this couple must endure in their determination to conceive.

Yet, during these trials, they never fail to see their plight with enough humour to survive what could only be described as humiliation. Sensing the ludicrousness of what he has been ordered to do, Colin turns to the audience and says: "Tell me... how many of you have ever tried bathing your balls?", then enumerates the various unsatisfactory methods which could be employed. Anne wakes her husband at night, clucking. "Your little hen has laid an egg!" she says.

The first act, generally, is an even balance of serious and absurd elements. But in the second, the couple's ordeals worsen, and the hopelessness of their situation must be faced. Irony turns to bitterness, frustration to rage.

Anne, unable to conceive, is tormented by her so-called friend, who has quite the opposite problem and flaunts her unwanted pregnancies. The couple's sex life goes rapidly downhill, and for the first time there is a distance between them, as each unwillingly and unconsciously blames the other for their failure.

then they must deal with the bureaucratic, judgmental members of the adoption agency, and they are honest — too honest: Colin about his homosexual tendencies, Anne about the flaws in their marriage. Once more, they are rejected. Nature has not decreed them to have a child, they conclude. It is time to pick a new path.

But the play makes its major point in the last hour, when the theme expands to include not only the agony of humans, but of a country. In two extremely well-played monologues, Colin and Anne reveal the true tragedy of their situation and bravery of their characters.

Colin is from Northern Ireland, but has lost his home. He has betrayed his country, and he alone realizes that the old Ireland must die before peace can come; he refuses to fight what he sees as a natural extinction.

At this point in what has, until now, seemed a witty and meaningful script, the play becomes profound, and one becomes aware of the beauty of Rudkin's language, which although not written as poetry strikes the ears as such.

Michael McManus and Davina Stewart maintain their characters, and accents, flawlessly throughout the performance, dealing with the difficulties of the play apparently effortlessly. The variety of minor characters played by Michael Davis and Brenda Brown are at times stereotyped but expertly done.

Elements which add to the overall effectiveness of the play, such as the abrupt ending of scenes, the characters' addressing of the audience, and absorbing monologues are all the work of director John Terfloth, who has brought out the strengths of all the actors.

Brian Currah's sparse set and sometimes harsh lighting reflect the bleakness of the setting itself, and allow the focus to remain on the superb work of the cast.