

Musical encounters of the best kind

Encounters Concert No.3
Convocation Hall
Sat., Jan. 18, 1986, 8 p.m.

review by John Charles

At last Saturday's Encounters concert even the stage set-up for the concluding piece was more exciting than the music for most Edmonton programs.

Two gleaming grand pianos, their lids removed to expose their strings, were surrounded by four kettle drums, plus a battery of percussion and a suspended gong. What an enticing invitation to twentieth-century music such a sight provides!

The work was Bartok's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937), one of his most radiant and confident masterpieces. Helmut Brauss was the force behind this performance, as he was some five years ago when it was played at one of his faculty recitals. This time his colleagues were student Elizabeth Laich, and percussionists, Barry Nemish and Brian Jones.

The *Sonata* began with the quietest of drumrolls, followed by the first piano's mysterious entry. It gradually sped up until both pianos hammered out the main theme. Melodies abound throughout, most notably the joyous xylophone folk tune in the finale. The piece is far from being a collection of sound effects, yet the delicate colors of cymbals, gong and xylophone are among the work's most charming features.

The first movement seems harried at times, as the pianists tended to play a bit loud and fast, without the wide dynamic range or the moments of spacious repose which gave the work more grandeur. The fugue wasn't launched with the alertness that makes it such a powerful summation to the first movement. Nevertheless, the result was still polished and thrilling, overall, and the formidable rhythmic subtleties were excellently handled by all four musicians.

Brauss mentioned afterwards that they had rehearsed together for 30 hours — not counting the solo practice needed to learn their parts. That's the kind of dedication that



Soprano Elsie Hepburn (center) and musical entourage.

Photo Rob Schmidt

makes the Encounters series so distinctive.

Another sacred text of modern music, Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, was heard. First performed in a Berlin cabaret in 1912, this song-cycle of 21 poems has had an enormous influence on vocal writing in our time. It described the moonstruck descent of Pierrot (poet/narrator/clown) into a sort of bad acid trip. Though the poem's nightmarish imagery is scary to read, Schoenberg's setting distance the emotional content, making them seem ironic or chillingly wry, unlike the frightening lyricism of his earlier *Erwartung* (1909), or a later vocal work like Maxwell Davies' *Revelation and Fall* (1965), which draws on heavily on this tradition.

Schoenberg set these poems to a vocal line dubbed *sprechstimme*, or talk-singing, which requires the singer to speak the words, but on a fixed pitch. Since the pitch changes constantly, the control needed is considerable, as it's easy to lapse into straight singing, which many prestigious sopranos do. But it's clearly not what Schoenberg wanted, and soprano Elsie Hepburn's *sprechstimme* was the real thing.

At times the sound she produced was a bit soft, so it didn't cut through the hard, bright

sounds of clarinet, flute and piano as it needs to. Partly because of the tortuous vocals the words were hard to follow. (Texts were included in the program, but with the hall darkened due to the spotlight on Hepburn you couldn't read them.) Her accuracy and intense involvement were admirable, and her stage manner — half-way between a formal concert style and an impassioned stage performance — seemed stylistically apt.

Malcolm Forsyth conducted the five instrumentalists, three of whom played two instruments, and all of whom played with exemplary precision and clarity. They were: Norman Nelson, Colin Ryan, Kerry Rittich, John Mahon, and Joachim Segger, and they made this listener deeply aware of the score's richness in its constantly changing combination of sounds.

If the evening's opening work was rather disappointing, it's not the composer's fault. Brahms' *Horn Trio*, Op. 40 (1865) is also a masterpiece, and very Brahmsian in its mellow warmth and melancholy atmosphere. It's a difficult work, since you've got to play lots of notes and convey the ensemble rapport which makes the music meld and soar. And rapport was lacking in this performance by violinist Norman Nelson, horn player Kay McAllister, and pianist Joachim Segger. Again and again the notes were proficiently sounded but the dramatic points were lost, and the music's passion seldom emerged.

McAllister did a solid job, adjusting her tone from soft to robust, but there was a tentativeness to the trio's interaction. Nelson, who played beautifully in a long phrase near the slow movement's climax, sometimes sounded edgy, as though his violin had a cold. And Segger seemed eager to cut loose in a solo recital, though his handling of many passages was stylish. The best moments were in the second and fourth movements, where Brahms' rhythmic drive and the players' accuracy carried the music along. Edmonton has heard more powerful and moving performances of this work. Having heard all three series concerts so far, it's apparent that the format of extensive program notes combined with on-stage commentary (by Prof. Christopher Lewis) is a bit excessive. One or the other should be sufficient to lead us into the concert. Lewis provides a friendly touch, but program notes can offer more information for those who want it. The ideal for this listener is having the performers themselves tell us facts which relate directly to the musical experience.

The last Encounters concert is Sunday, March 2.

The little engine that could

Runaway Train
Plaza, West Mall

review by John Charles

Are you ready for a spaghetti train movie? *Runaway Train* is right over the top, a philosophical action movie which recalls such great Sergio Leone westerns as *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, in its exaggerated, larger-than-life mythic yearnings.

The story's hero is Manny (Jon Voight), a desperate criminal, who's been welded into a solitary cell in an Alaskan penitentiary for three years so he won't escape again. But a court rules he's got to be put in an ordinary cell, and the movie opens with his fellow-prisoners cheering him while the warden Ranken (John P. Ryan) curses.

Manny's side-kick, Buck (Eric Roberts), is in charge of laundry detail, and within 10 minutes Manny has jumped into a laundry basket and escaped again, off and running across the bleak terrain, with Buck breathlessly accompanying him. Abruptly, they're in a train yard, and jump on a weatherbeaten train — without observing, as we do, that the engineer has just had a heart attack and fallen out of the engine. The rest of the film happens aboard the train, as they — and others realize the train is an unmanned runaway.

When you're making a movie that's symbolic, not realistic, getting your audience on the right wave length these days can be a problem. Director Andrei Konchalovsky starts off in a manic, excessive way with everyone bellowing and saying ultimate things to establish his world. And he's also busy setting up some basic conflicts, and thus skims over details or plausibility until Manny gets on the train. This viewer's reaction was to recoil dismissively for the first 30 minutes, until the movie's ideas started coming into focus.

The movie is about freedom in the largest sense. Buck thinks freedom is lawlessness — running amuck without any controls. But that conception has led to being a prisoner — existing with no physical freedom. Manny's conception of freedom stems from perfect inner control, but he doesn't have it. And the movie is finally about how Manny achieves it through compassion and self-sacrifice.

In the movie's key speech, as the train is whizzing along — the perfect embodiment of negative freedom without control, headed for destruction — Manny describes a man sweeping a warehouse floor who's yelled at by his boss. Does he kill the boss out of

pent-up rage? Or does he say, "Yes sir," and carefully polish the spot the boss pointed to? If you can do the latter, Manny says, you can do anything — even become president!

Manny, as the representative of Mankind Daring All, may remind you of Ahab in *Moby Dick* (with the train as whale in the final moments) or the Jack Nicholson role in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, representing hope to the people around him who are on the bottom of life's ladder. The final shots of *Runaway Train* show the smiling prisoners behind bars "seeing" Manny escape into some transcendent ultimate freedom.

The movie is well-paced, cutting among the escapees, the warden, and the engine control room, where the crew warns other trains to get off the tracks, and tries to decide whether or not to derail it. And the look of the film is superb, everything rusted, grimy and worn. The control room is determinedly low-tech, and more convincing for that. And the many shots of the train (actually four engines counted), speeding through the frozen landscape, in aerial views and closeups for the tracks, help create momentum. The most beautiful, disturbing images are of the prisoners rioting, with little fires in the corridors, and torn paper drifting down. And these shots clearly related to the movie's themes.

Acknowledging that the movie has a lot to offer, it must be said that the script is clumsy, and that Voight and Roberts are pretty tiresome (instead of unsympathetic but interesting) most of the time. Konchalovsky is not particularly good at directing people, and the way the foreground plot has been developed is the movie's big problem. If it was done right, the audience would slip into an appreciation of the big issues more readily. But Konchalovsky ends up in pretentiousness, with Vivaldi's *Gloria* on the soundtrack, and a final quote from Shakespeare. You can feel the action-bent audience collectively thinking: "Gimme a break!"

The original screenplay was by Japanese director Akira Kurasawa (*Ran*), and it's easy to imagine a more rigorously shaped film in his masterful hands, as well as the advantage of reading subtitles, instead of hearing Roberts endlessly say "Oh man! Yeah, man!", or Voight utter weighty thoughts in comic-book lingo.

The eternal conflict of prisoner and warden is not given any new twist in the interactions of Voight and Ranken, but Rebecca DeMornay, as Sara, does well in a pretty abstract role.

And it certainly makes you think about public transportation in new light.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Feb 4 & 5

SKI HUB

- colorful displays,
information booths by
local sporting goods
stores and ski clubs

Feb 7

STREET DANCE

12:30 - 3:30
with live band

"BEN SERIOUS"

Feb 14

VALENTINE'S DAY

"BRING YOUR SWEETHEART TO HUB MALL"

- *Let our guitarist serenade you with love songs.
- *Cupid will be giving away heart-shaped balloons.
- *Enter the draw for "Gifts for Two"

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