

The Philadelphia Inquirer

January 29, 2008

A satisfying series of new-music performances

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Music Critic

The new-music community more or less spent the weekend together in a series of concerts that demanded attention that was mostly rewarded and rewarding - the last Philadelphia Orchestra performances of Jennifer Higdon's new pieces, Concerto 4-3 and The Singing Rooms on Friday at the Kimmel Center, the Philadelphia premiere of Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* by Orchestra 2001 at the Independence Seaport Museum, and Relache ensemble's annual Sonic Cinema concert Sunday at the Gershman Y.

Some even went to Swarthmore on Sunday night for a repeat Boulez encounter - smart move, since Orchestra 2001 had more to offer than what immediately met the ear on Saturday night. Unconventionally scored for percussionists, wind and string players plus voice, *Le Marteau* is so rich and abstract that there are

infinite ways to connect the dots, so to speak, from one performance to another.

Orchestra 2001 played mightily, better at Saturday's dress rehearsal (which I attended due to the repertoire's difficulty) than at the evening performance. In rehearsal, there was a greater sense of the ensemble releasing the score rather than laboring over it. Boulez's dense, intricate constructions had a nice elasticity and particularly alluring tone colors in a dreamy succession of musical imagery. Saturday night, the players worked hard rather than smart (it was a bit ham-fisted at first, and not all notes were there), intensely keeping track of their own parts but yielding an effective series of spikily etched freeze frames. In both performances, mezzo-soprano Freda Herseth was a bit of a miracle, lyrically navigating the jagged Boulez vocal lines and coloring the surreal text with a vocal richness I've heard

in no other Boulez interpreter.

The rest of the 2001 program was a far-less-dense pair of pieces that toured more familiar territory. Kenji Bunch's *Suite for Viola and Piano* is a charming, well-crafted overview of Les Six, the generation of French composers before Boulez. Allen Krantz's guitar concerto *Songs of Innocence and Experience* filtered Pacific Rim musics through Krantz's own American lens in a work so affable that with a charismatic interpreter like Jason Vieaux, it's bound to become standard guitar concerto repertoire...

...The concert ended with a seven-minute dream sequence from the 1925 *Beggar on Horseback* in which young Edward Everett Horton is marrying a rich but repulsive heiress surrounded by a demonic wedding party that's wildly awash in dollar signs. Thanks to Relache's raucous, rhythmic soundtrack, this was the film that held up best.