

Mary Fukushima, Flute  
Michael Kirkendoll, Piano  
Weill Recital Hall, 4 June 2006

Manhattan is quite a long way from Kansas, and though the Big Apple may be Oz to some folks, to others it's a city where you either strike gold and make a lasting impression, or come to do your best and falter in the process. The latter statement is not the case for Mary Fukushima, a former New Yorker by way of California who is presently studying at the University of Kansas for her doctorate with David Fedele, where she also serves as his graduate teaching assistant. For her New York recital debut she brought Michael Kirkendoll, another ex- New Yorker who is studying for his doctorate at the same university.

For her debut, Ms. Fukushima chose a very demanding program - all contemporary. Such programs would frighten the average lay listener away. If it doesn't have Beethoven, Brahms or even Stravinsky, why come? But the faithful who believe in a new artist did come, and greeted her with rapturous applause.

The program began with Aaron Copland's 1971 Duo, dedicated to William Kincaid and premiered by Elaine Shaffer. Though Copland describes it as "a work of comparatively simple harmonic and melodic outline, direct in expression," it does require a performer who is mature and able to handle the composer's bag of tricks. Ms. Fukushima's warm, yet brilliant sound handled Copland's revisit to his populist period, and Mr. Kirkendoll played many of the jazzy riffs and neo-classical angular bents without fault, providing his partner with a pure atmospheric sound that colored her phrasing and shaping of the composer's Grant Wood-like vision.

Gabriella Lena Frank, an American composer of Peruvian and Jewish heritage based in San Francisco, was represented by her 2002 work Sueños de Chambi: Snapshots for an Andean Album, receiving its first New York performance. In seven movements, the work, inspired by Martin Chambi's photographs of Peruvian life in the early half of the 20th century, is very colorful and evocative and filled with the approximate sounds of percussion, fireworks and shouts, all coming from the duo instrumentalists. The first and sixth movements allowed Ms. Fukushima a chance to shine on the alto flute. Her husky tone, coupled with the composer's use of modernist techniques, was very moving and dewy, the tranquility of the first punctuated by the piano with distilled, isolated chords.

The faster sections, like Diabolicos Pueños and the final Marinera are quite earthy and animated, and in the hands of these two performers, enhance the visual aspects of these photographs in a musical sense. Mr. Kirkendoll had his chance to shine in the work's fifth movement (Adoración para Angelitos), a mournful lullaby based on a Peruvian nursery rhyme from a collection of works by the musicologist Andre Sás. His cool sound, yet balanced tone this movement was focused and thought-provoking.

Though I have not heard any of Ms. Frank's music until now, her reputation has been growing among those in the music world. Her unique blend of styles does not cater to the eclectic, nor does her modernist bend make her music alienate the audience. This critic would like to hear more of her music on this side of the country.

For the second half of the program, Ms. Fukushima programmed an assortment of American and French composers. Messiaen's *Le Merle Noir* from 1951 and André Jolivet's 1944 *Chant de linos* framed three distinctive works by American composers. The first of the American composers was Brian Bondari, a graduate student at the University of Kansas currently working on a production of incidental music for a Eurpidies play in Greece and his first symphony. Commissioned by the Fukushima-Kirkendoll duo, Bondari's *Kaykhosrow's Ascension* is a programmatic work of epic sound and color, provocative in its musical telling of the story of a king who prays for forgiveness from his evil ways, and in turn gives up his throne and disappears in the middle of the night. Mr. Bondari has a natural affinity for capturing the essence of the tale in musical terms. Like Frank,

Bondari's music incorporates modernist techniques to heighten the tension and explore the dramatic, its melismatic oriental theme is subjected to compositional permutations that culminate with the use of the octatonic scale ascends to depict his subject's rise to the heavens. His compositional structure is sound, and his melodic voice secure and original. This is no doctoral student, but a composer waiting for greater things to come his way. This reviewer wishes him well.

David Rakowski's *Firecat* (1993) and Joyce Meekel's *The Shape of Silence* (1969) are both inspired by American poetry, the former by Wallace Stevens' *Earthy Anecdote*, the latter a memorial to Theodore Roethke. Rakowski's fragmentary, pointillistic opening gives way to a fuller, more developed line, which becomes more dramatic and rhetorical, yet never loses its sense of wry humor in this concentrated fantasy. Meekel's ode to Roethke, for solo flute, allows the performer to speak and sometimes sing various words of the poem into the instrument, interpreting their moods rather than take it at face value. A very theatrical work as well, Ms. Fukushima brought a lot of personality and charm to this unsung and unknown work.

The Messiaen and Jolivet works, both written by their composers as competition pieces for the Paris Conservatory, are virtuoso tour de forces for both flutist and pianist. In the case of the Messiaen, the forces of modal introspection and intellectual extroversion are quite obvious, but as a composer who both adheres and detracts from tradition, *Le Merle Noir* is a work which brings out the best in a performer, and Ms. Fukushima was more than up to the task, matching Messiaen's cool intellect with his warm feelings for nature and birdsound. Mr. Kirkendoll matched her sound and in many ways, his own personality also came to the surface, bringing out the countersubjects quite well without overshadowing his partner. Jolivet's original and provocative tone poem depicting the Apollo's curse over King Argos in the wake of the death of his wife Psamanthe and his son Linus confirms this writer's belief that this was a composer whose marked individuality is still unknown to many people in and outside the musical world. Extremely difficult for both flutist and pianist, Ms. Fukushima and Mr. Kirkendoll met Jolivet's demands to the fullest and delivered a powerful performance that satisfied everyone who heard them that afternoon.

In short, here is a duo that should not go gentle into that good night. More dawning to them, and more commissions from worthy composers who can write for these powerhouse of performers.