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Review of the CD containing 'The Feasts of Fear and Agony, 'Music for 3 instruments' and 'Improvisations', by Liesbeth Devos, soprano and Het Collectief, cond. Vykintas Baltakas.

Original article

http://www.kwadratuur.be/cdbesprekingen/detail/bram_van_camp_-_the_feasts_of_fear_and_agony_music_for_3_instruments_improv/#.WTQ9ZNAZZ9h

Translation

Five years after "Close My Willing Eyes" featuring the work of Bart Vanhecke, the Belgian chamber music ensemble Het Collectief has released a second CD, devoted exclusively to the music of a young countryman. This time the thirtysomething Bram Van Camp is the lucky composer. Three of his compositions are on the CD. The first, "The Feasts of Fear and Agony" based on poems by Paul Van Ostaijen, takes up over half of the CD. For this work, the standard quintet of The Collective is extended by three musicians and the soprano Liesbeth Devos.

Van Camp's music is not immediately melodically and harmoniously apparent, but anyone taking the trouble to attentively listen to his music can quickly be taken in by Van Camp's world. An important element is the exceptionally beautiful orchestration where the colors of the different instruments overlap and the music very smoothly changes from fast, spindly movements to a frozen standstill and pending excitement. It becomes clear how well Van Camp models the sound and the musical material. Without having to resort to catchy melodies, the composer still manages to forge the music into a meaningful whole, even to the extent that the result is reminiscent of the visual orchestration and melodies of Schoenberg's "Erwartung", albeit without the searing climaxes, but with the mysterious and sometimes ominous parts.

The music evokes psychedelic visions which are also present in Van Ostaijen's poetry. Of course, these psychedelic elements stand or fail with the interpretation of Liesbeth Devos. Her contribution is at times astounding. Not only her superb intonation, but also her poignant diction stands out (sung as well as spoken). Anyone not familiar with modern music practice, will at first be surprised by her extremely crisp pronunciation, but just as the image Van Ostaijen creates is important in the poem, the mere pronunciation of the text is an essential part of the music. Moreover, Van Camp strives to musically translate many words in the text, so that an attentive listener benefits from a clear diction.

The second piece, "Music for 3 Instruments" has a much more abstract title, but it sounds anything but abstract. Again Van Camp succeeds in placing a clarinet, a violin and a piano perfectly in line, allowing the sound of the different instruments to overlap in a disorienting way. This effect is reinforced by the speed and flexibility with which the musicians pass on the basic material (isolated or rapidly repeated notes or tremolos) to each other, bandying the listener from pillar to post.

However, Van Camp goes further and allows the melodic and rhythmic elements to transform. This way the sound becomes almost liquid after the first nervous part, only to later dissolve into trills. The former generate a remarkable tension which only disappears when the three musicians pointillistically link up with one another. This way the atmosphere regularly changes until in the end the piece reverts to the initial material but in a pronounced minimalist way. The music almost resembles silence, forcing the listener to follow it until the end.

The final part of Improvisations shows that Van Camp reverses the idea. In this work - no improvisation, but a carefully choreographed score - solo violinist Wibert Aerts is given all the opportunities and space to express the musical schizophrenia of the composition. Music for 3 Instruments is about the fusion of three instruments, but Improvisations seems to be aimed at showing different characters with one violin. Virtuoso tremolos, pizzicatos and arpeggios all seem to allow different characters to have their say, while the danger of abstract technicality is of course lying in wait. Aerts however, takes the listener by the hand and guides him through great contrasts in tessitura and polyphonic passages (even to polyphonic trills) that he plays with such ease that all detachment disappears and the music really starts to speak. At least for those who want to listen...

(Koen Van Meel, Kwadratuur, April 2014)