



Music
William Littler

Percussion the main course in challenging concert

There was a time, somewhere in music's past, when composers treated percussion instruments as the salt and pepper in their scores. Now, it seems, these same instruments are becoming the principal ingredient.

Or at least they are in scores such as Lothar Klein's *Design for Percussion and Orchestra* which had its world premiere in the University of Toronto's MacMillan Theatre last night.

Design for Percussion and Orchestra certainly doesn't restrict itself to the sounds of bang, crash and thump; there is a middle section in which the strings, bless their silken souls, bow away warmly.

But its two outer sections, the latter repeating the former backwards, make much ado about virtuosity as it is practised by the men who strike skin and metal for a living.

INVENTIVE COMPOSER

Being an inventive composer, Klein finds many interesting things for these men to do, producing at a couple of points the most extraordinary glissando whistles, reminiscent of gas escaping from a dirigible.

He does not quite convince us that salt and pepper make a nourishing entree. As an appetiser, though, *Design for Percussion and Orchestra* goes down easily enough.

It was followed, on last night's CBC Festival program, by Gyorgy Ligeti's *Atmospheres*, one of the scores Stanley Kubrick so cleverly employed to evoke the sensations of outer space in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Ligeti is one composer who still believes in the expressive potential of strings and in *Atmospheres* he creates an uncanny sensation of timelessness by having them fill textures with slithering scrapings and crescendos on long sustained pitches that seem to go nowhere.

The audience applauded *Atmospheres* generously, bringing the hint of a smile to the super-cool face of the evening's guest conductor, Marius Constant. Constant, one of France's leading avant-gardists, regained his composure upon ob-

serving the milder reaction toward his own *Chaconne et Marche Militaire*.

With *Chaconne et Marche Militaire* we were once again in salt and pepper country, the percussionists being the pace-setters. According to the program notes, the *Chaconne's* theme becomes subject to a series of variations inspired by optical laws.

Not being expert in optics, your reviewer declines to give the music an eye test. Aurally, it offered plenty of crescendos topped by percussive sunbursts, held sonorities followed by jagged dissonances and all sorts of exploding energy.

By way of contrast Charles Koechlin's *Les Bandar-Log*, a symphonic poem modelled after Kipling's *Jungle Book*, of all things, sounded like a decided throw-back to a time when composers wrote not only tonally but narratively.

The *Bandar-Logs*, you may recall, are monkeys, and Koechelin uses their propensities as mimics as a metaphor for taking us on a trip through musical styles current up to 1939, the year of the work's composition.

The French seem to regard Koechelin and his music as highly significant these days, and no doubt Marius Constant drilled the CBC Festival Orchestra to the point at which it gave us as good a listen to *Les Bander-Log* as we are likely to get in Toronto.

RICHLY SCORED

Nevertheless, the piece sounded more clever than substantial. Richly scored, sometimes strikingly fresh, it still has too much to do with monkey business.

The remaining piece on last night's ear-challenging program seemed, curiously enough, to bring together some of the string-consciousness of Ligeti with the percussion-consciousness of Klein and Constant.

In his *Capriccio for Violin and Orchestra*, Krzysztof Penderecki almost makes the violin a percussion instrument, skittering around amid brass raspberries, amplified guitar plunks and massed orchestral sonorities. Lorand Fenyves was the high flying (in pitch, at any rate) soloist, and perhaps thereby the symbol of music's available middle road.