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MUSIC REVIEW

MUSIC REVIEW;A Concerto That Really Isn't

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

A composer can have a striking compositional voice and still write a piece that is not entirely successful. Friday night's concert at Alice Tully Hall by the New Juilliard Ensemble, conducted by Joel Sachs, presented four such works. Yet taken together, they made for an engrossing evening of music, which is something you can count on when Mr. Sachs is in charge.

"Into the Light," a kinetic piece for large ensemble by Amanda Harberg, a 22-year-old recent Juilliard graduate, received its world premiere. A fidgety figure becomes a relentless ostinato, then a sort of theme for a passacaglia, until the idea is temporarily abandoned for a sultry excursion into lyricism. The materials seem rather thin for the workout they are assigned. But Ms. Harberg's tonally grounded language is spiked with pungency.

Another world premiere was *Concertino for Tape and Chamber Ensemble* by Roberto Sierra, a Puerto Rican-born composer now on the faculty at Cornell. With its shimmering colors and frenetic rhythmic drive, this piece skillfully integrates Caribbean musical idioms into a rigorous compositional style.

Stefano Gervasoni's *Concerto for Viola* (1994) isn't a concerto in any traditional sense. The violist, David Wallace, mostly had to fit the effects and gestures of his "solo" part into the busy orchestra fabric. This Italian composer's audacious piece has inventive rhythms, skittish gestures and colors galore. There are no real melodies, just motivic bits, and no functional harmony other than slicing chords that punctuate the textures, often humorously. It's delirious, perplexing music, which may be the idea.

Timothy Geller's "Where Silence Reigns" (1987), for baritone and large ensemble thick with percussion, is an almost expressionistic setting of a long excerpt from Rilke's anguished "Duino Elegies." This substantive piece, over 30 minutes long, trembles with delicate colors and explodes with ominous screechings. The main problem is the scoring, which often covered the vocalist (James Bobick, a fine young baritone) with avalanches of instrumental sound.

All the works received solid, compelling performances, another trademark of Mr. Sachs's programs.

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