

A Musical Democracy

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra premieres the *Lost Waltz*

By Jayne Keedle

If you've ever arrived at a concert early, you know that the sound of musicians tuning their instruments or noodling out a couple of quick passages is hardly harmonious. No one is listening to anyone else and everyone is playing something different. Then the conductor takes the podium and with the tap-tap of a baton, pulls the whole symphony together.

Now imagine what would happen if there was no conductor. The very idea may make the people planning to attend the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra concert at the Bushnell on Nov. 17 think about packing earplugs, because this orchestra has 26 members, and no conductor. Nevertheless, they sound great.

Although it's a pretty unusual arrangement, it's not unprecedented. In the 1920s, there was a Russian orchestra that frequently played without a conductor. In the Baroque era, it was the norm rather than the exception that chamber music ensembles be led by the keyboardist or the concert master.

Orpheus, however, is even more democratic than that. Everyone takes a turn to lead, depending on the composition. How a piece should be interpreted is decided beforehand by committee. Section leaders—and everyone takes a turn at that post, too—meet to discuss each work, then bring their ideas before the entire orchestra.

Composer and sometime Orpheus flutist Elizabeth Brown says she prefers to work without a conductor. "It's wonderful," she says. "Every instrumentalist has an individual voice, rather than having everything dictated by a conductor. In a large symphony, you really need a conductor because you can't hear everything that's going on. In a small group, you can with good acoustics on the stage. You're listening as well as watching. It keeps your ear wide open all the time."

As a composer, Brown is perhaps more used to thinking of the orchestra as a whole and not just of her own individual part. Her experience as a performer, however, has shaped the way she composes. Usually her work is commissioned for a particular orchestra or ensemble. Before writing a piece, she first sits in the audience and listens to the musicians perform. Then she writes the music with them in mind.

When Orpheus performs in Hartford, Brown will be sitting in the audience again and, although she's never nervous on stage, she says she'll be shaking in her seat. This concert will mark the world premier of a new work, *Lost Waltz*, which Brown wrote specifically for Orpheus. It's sandwiched between Mozart's piano Concertos No. 9 in E-flat Major and No. 24 in C Minor and Handel's *Suite in D Major* from "The Water Music," pretty heady company.

"I'm scared to death," Brown

admits. "I'm flattered about being on the program with so many masterpieces, but a little apprehensive. I know in my head exactly what the piece sounds like, but I don't know what the reaction of the audience will be. To me, because I've been writing it for a year and a half, the piece is very familiar."

Hartford is fairly familiar territory for Brown, who lives in New York City. She was recently at the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music for a concert in April, and she has friends here to offer moral support.

"This is my first orchestra piece," she says. "My music is very intimate in feeling. I'm bad at describing it. It's neither tonal nor atonal, but it definitely has harmonic weight. It's more listenable than most new music, which

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is the type of stuff that often turns classic music listeners off. Musically, audiences like me, which makes the contemporary new music establishment think I'm too conservative!"

Brown is best known for composing music for specific and rather unusual instruments. She's written for Harry Partch's often bizarre microtonal instruments and composed for glass harmonica and

shakuhachi, a traditional Japanese notched flute. The flutist first heard that particular instrument while on a concert tour in Japan, and fell in love with the sound. Now, she says, "I have a piece for shakuhachi in three strings and you'd think something like that would never get performed, but it gets performed all the time. Someone just did it in the Ukraine."

Currently she's working on her first piece for a full orchestra, which means she'll be writing for a brass section for the first time. The piece was commissioned by Dartmouth College orchestra to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the school going co-ed. It seems fitting that Brown, one of a handful of contemporary female composers writing concert music, has the honor.

Foremost on her mind, however, is the upcoming premier of *Lost Waltz*. The score is for flute, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and strings and there are three main themes, one a fragment of a familiar children's song. "I don't want to reveal the name of the song," she says. "Out of context it seems silly, but in the piece it comes through as quite poignant."

Brown says she heard the song on the subway in New York the other day. Someone was selling wind-up toys that played it over and over. She's not sure if that's a good omen or not. But getting the commission from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra certainly bodes well. "It's nice to know I could write anything and they could just play it to perfection," says Brown.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra performs at The Bushnell in Hartford Nov. 17 at 8 p.m. with pianist Richard Goode. Tickets are \$24 - \$40.50. Call 246-6807. ■



Composer Elizabeth Brown: Next week she'll be shaking in her seat.