

new music connoisseur

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"WORD!" Kevin James & The Quadragon Trombone Collective.

In our first exposure to this earnest collective, we came away with two impressions-- that Quadragon, a young ensemble of already experienced orchestral players (some of whom also compose), keeps its skill and artistry alive by straddling chronological polarities, and that Kevin James may be in the forefront of a new breed of classically trained but socially concerned composers, trying to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Frederic Rzewski. Between Heinrich Schutz and Jookin' we jumped more than three centuries, with nary a thing in between, save, perhaps, the two songs of Kurt Weill from the first half of the century.

Mr. James' compositions are in consort with the exploratory but accessible crest of the new wave. His works are novel, but the listener has no trouble following their paths. I Will Not Try to Lose My Head is a response to a rap tune by Grandmaster Flash bemoaning the issue of teenage pregnancy. Formally, it's a cannon in which nine trombonists engage in counterpoint that suggests the street sounds of the inner city, including laughter which quickly dissolves into the cries of a baby as the bass trombonists engage groans ironically and, perhaps, prophetically.

"Judy," a portrait in progress, uses a tape recording of a homeless woman, while the collective (brass quintet) plays shuffled variations on, among other tunes, "God Bless America." The complete work, commissioned by the Coalition for the Homeless, is scheduled for its premiere at Town Hall in September 1998.

"Love for a Hand" is an immensely moving song for soprano and brass set to a poem by Karl Shapiro. Mr. James wrote it originally as a wedding gift to his bride. It was sung here with sweet simplicity by Lisa Bielawa who, up to this point, had focused on two songs of Kurt Weill from his Brecht collaborations. Ms. Bielawa sang those in a manner very close to the Weill-Lenya tradition, that is, with authenticity.

Jookin' is based on five poems by A. Van Jordan, who also served as reader on this occasion. The poems deal with subjects ranging from the sensual to the violent in the ... low-key and... jazz-inflected piece. The poems are: "Jookin'": "After 75 years, Greenwood, Oklahoma Gets a Statue"; "J.J. Johnson Changes Tempo"; "Tamara's Dance (A Woman from the Projects)"; "The Balancing Act." There were some nice ideas expressed in the 13 minutes of music here, and the poetic sentiments were sincere.

Barry L.Cohen