

THE REPUBLICANS: THE CONVENTION IN NEW YORK -- REVIEW

With Voices, Drums and Even Silence, Artists Take a Stand

By Allan Kozinn

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Entering Washington Square Church for "The Republic in Ruins," a collaborative performance piece that opened last evening as an angry counterpoint to the Republican National Convention, a visitor passes two pillars of television monitors showing people of all ages and races reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and banners with quotations about protest and citizenship by, among others, James Madison and Günter Grass.

The program, assembled by Mouths Wide Open, a group that encourages artistic responses to current affairs, included performances by classical musicians, avant-gardists, jazz players, folk singers and performers who touch with several of those styles, at least peripherally. Together with a handful of speeches, their contributions were offered as a deliberately nonhomogenous statement of opposition to the Bush administration.

This protest included a series of silent tableaux, staged by the Collateral Damage Ensemble. In "Child's Play," young boys digging in the sand find spent shell casings. In "Loss," two women prepare a body for a funeral. These sketches were accompanied by a slow-moving, dark-hued electronic work, "Dismal Ambience for the Times," by Bruce Odland.

Electronics figured into several other pieces as well. Vijay Iyer's "Refugees of the Republic," a New Agey piano score, was accompanied by a tape of colorful electronic sounds. Jerome Kitzke, a pianist and vocalist, used amplification effectively in the opening scat section of his "Mad Coyote Madly Sings," a spiky piano work during which he also recited fragments of works by several poets.

"Resignation to Alarm," a chamber piece by Derek Bermel, was essentially as its title suggests -- a slow, moody work that grows increasingly tense until the clarinet, violin and cello lines virtually shriek. That afforded a perfect segue into a pounding percussion piece by Kenny Wollesen and Live Human Subjects, and another Collateral Damage sketch that was both scary and a little silly: four actors in skull masks galloped slowly across the church on toy broomstick horses (as the four horsemen of the apocalypse) labeled Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Ashcroft.

In purely artistic terms, the most affecting performance was the Roerich String Quartet's incandescent reading of the slow movement from Beethoven's Quartet No. 15 (Op. 132), a work written at a time and place far from the current troubles. But Beethoven was an idealist who opposed tyranny, and in the context of a discussion about curtailed civil liberties, elective war and a striving toward empire -- the subjects of several of the speeches -- it seemed entirely at home.

The speakers included the author Jonathan Schell, who touched on environmental and economic issues, but mainly criticized the Republican Party's amassing of power in recent years, and maintained that creating a global empire will erode democracy both abroad and at home. Two Columbia University professors spoke as well. Patricia J. Williams offered personal reflections on the curtailment of liberty, including racial and ethnic profiling and open-ended incarceration. And Hamid Dabashi delivered an incendiary diatribe, propelled by hatred of Israel and the United States -- not just the current government, but the culture in general -- that seemed out of place in this program. Yet it drew a standing ovation. The finale, in which Dominic Veconi, a boy soprano, sang "How Can I Keep from Singing?" seemed even stranger coming immediately after Mr. Dabashi's speech.

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