

MUSIC REVIEW

MUSIC REVIEW; 25 Years of Searching, Unsentimental Atonality

By Bernard Holland

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[See the article in its original context from April 21, 1999, Section E, Page 5](#) [Buy Reprints](#)[VIEW ON TIMESMACHINE](#)

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Parnassus celebrated its 25th anniversary on Monday night. Anthony Korf's brave band of virtuosos is one of a handful of musical groups that make sure that New Yorkers, in spite of themselves, know what is new and substantial in one small world of composition.

Parnassus's relatively long life represents a triumph of endurance. For a small and not easily penetrated school of music to survive in a cultural atmosphere indifferent or downright hostile to its activities has been difficult.

All of Monday's program, played before a respectable but by no means sold-out house at Merkin Concert Hall, was written for the occasion and the materials at hand: a few solo strings and winds, usually an elaborate piano part, percussion, mallet and otherwise. Tonality is left behind or to one side. Meter changes are profuse. Colors tend toward the clean and the bright. Overt sentiment is kept at bay, although Donald Martino's five-movement "Serenata Concertante" features long effusive melody in unison at the start and an elegiac retreat into quietness at the close.

Marc Gustavson's "Fool's Journey" acted out the iconography of tarot cards, beginning with wandering chords set beneath the birdlike screeches of the piccolo and moving to elaborations of small descending motifs. Each variation seemed to have the character of laughter, sometimes discreet, sometimes raucous. The plucking and percussive textures of

Stephen Hartke's "Gradus," with a brief, slow nocturne set in their midst, had a bluntness of declamation, tinges of popular culture and a complication of movement that denote a very American kind of restlessness.

If Mr. Martino's mostly dense and dour piece made little attempt to welcome the newcomer, Mario Davidovsky's "Festino Notturmo" was a delicate feast for the ear. Muted trumpet and strings, sharply and loudly interrupted from time to time, offered beautifully separated colors fitting loosely and lightly together. If not the evening's best music, it was certainly the most immediately pleasing.

These were all terribly difficult pieces played by excellent musicians who care. The players of Parnassus have other jobs, but they obviously wanted to do this one well. Mr. Korf is a good conductor, a unifying force and apparently adept at the survival tactics a group like this must employ. There are two ways of looking at what they do, and one can't choose between them.

First, is Parnassus a courageous Custer-like last stand for a discredited school of esoteric composition? Or is it a holding action, a determined and farsighted effort to keep alive a modern tradition of difficult music by the few, for the few? Certainly Monday's audience contained little evidence of a public's wider interest in their work. One had the impression of like minds, and not many of them, huddling together for protection.

Are Parnassus and its colleagues the true prophets? Do they play the roles of vanguard and preserver, biding their time until the new age arrives? Are they, in other words, the 20th century's version of misunderstood geniuses as told to us in Romantic lore, saintly presences in their high-tech garrets due for future resurrection? I don't think so, but I may be wrong.

The players were Keith Underwood, Marcia Butler, Alan R. Kay and Lauren Goldstein Stubbs, wind players; David Jolley and Raymond Mase, brass players; James Preiss and Frank Cassara, percussionists; Christopher Oldfather, pianist, and Cyrus Stevens, Sarah Adams, Christopher Finckel and Gail Kruvand, string players.