

'Soul Garden' a nice musical mix

BERMEL'S GOSPEL-POP LOVE SHINES THROUGH

By Richard Scheinin

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Derek Bermel's "Soul Garden" has a heart of melody that sounds like the sweet moanings of a singer in a Pentecostal church. Written for a viola, that melodic line arches over a small choir of strings that rustle and sigh as the piece rises and falls and rises back up into a thick, holy commotion, all the parts rubbing up against each other, sweet and sour, like lemons and sugar.

"Soul Garden" was given a beautiful, blazing performance Friday night at Santa Clara University by the Adorno Ensemble, a crackerjack new music band in residence at the school. It spent last week in the Bay Area with Bermel, a hot, 30-something composer from New York who also happens to be a loose-limbed, virtuoso clarinetist.

He brought along his horn for the mini-tour of his music. Whenever he played it Friday at Santa Clara's Music Recital Hall, the fascination only increased; this was one of the most enjoyable concerts I've attended lately.

What's striking about Bermel's music is that, even though every note of it is written down -- more than that, every inflection is notated in his scores -- it has a fresh, improvisatory feeling.

The violist Yoko Okayasu, who played the moaning line in "Soul Garden," might have been a jazz soloist, she performed it with such personal, aching commitment. When Bermel, in a post-concert discussion, sat down at the piano to outline the composition's harmonies and sing the moaning line in a soft falsetto, you could hear the work's gospel-pop underpinnings.

He might have turned it into a pop tune. Instead, he joked, he decided "to make the least possible amount of money" and transformed it into chamber music.

Something interesting is happening here. Bermel loves gospel, jazz and pop, it's clear. He grew up playing in rock and jazz groups. He has studied Lobi xylophone in Ghana and Thracian folk songs in Bulgaria.

It's all in his music, embedded in a deep way. In other words, yeah, this is chamber music, with all the requisite structure and development. But it's freshly

appealing. Just as Haydn and Mahler built folk songs into their compositions, Bermel melds music he knows and loves into his works.

Another example: His "Coming Together" is a duet for clarinet and cello, consisting entirely of glissandi, sliding pitches, which wind up simulating a street-corner conversation with voice-like squawks, murmurs, shouts and growls that grow ever closer together in range and rhythmic intensity.

Listening to Friday's super-good performance by Bermel and Adorno cellist Michael Graham, I flashed on the improvised "conversations" that bassist Charles Mingus and woodwind master Eric Dolphy recorded in the early '60s. Bermel seemed to be referencing them, maybe unconsciously.

It was a blast.

There isn't room here to review the entire program, so I urge readers to find Bermel's "Soul Garden" CD on the CRI label and to read his blog at www.derekbermel.blogspot.com. His many projects involve work with composer John Adams, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, and the American Composers Orchestra.

Also, keep an eye out for the Adorno Ensemble, a group that plays with conviction and vitality and blows the dust off classical music (www.adornoensemble.org).

I should mention one more thing about Friday: An added bonus was a performance of composer Joel Phillip Friedman's "Elastic Band," a work of serious fun, which also draws on pop and jazz.

This was only a run-through; Adorno hadn't had adequate rehearsal time and only got to two of its three movements.

Still, you could hear how Friedman, who teaches at Santa Clara, has ingeniously transformed popular themes in a chamber setting. He even cops (his admission) Ringo Starr's famous, thudding drum solo from the Beatles' "Abbey Road" and turns it into a motif. The second movement takes on Duke Ellington's "jungle music" of the '20s when the great Sonny Greer sat behind the traps.

Adorno percussionist Ben Paysen moved from Ringo to Greer with aplomb.

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