

Dispatch from Tenri: The Kenners

<http://www.sequenza21.com/index.php/606>

The versatile performing duo known as “The Kenners” played a terrific concert Saturday night at the Tenri Cultural Institute. The program featured works by Charles Wuorinen, Toru Takemitsu, and Jason Eckhardt, and premieres of one form or another by Kate Soper, David Brynjar Franzson, and Petr Bakla. The Kenners’ catch is that each musician plays more than one instrument. Saturday’s program required Eliot Gattegno to switch between alto, tenor, and soprano saxophones; Eric Wubbels alternated between piano and accordion. (Sometimes he performs live electronics as well.)

Soper and Franzson provided the world premieres. I liked Soper’s *I Had a Slow Thought on a Hard Day* for accordion and alto sax. A meditative piece interspersing lyrical gestures with pitch-less pulling and pushing of air through both instruments, the music successfully sustains a slow rate of development and builds elegantly into more continuous passages. Franzson’s aggressive and noisy piece for the same combination, *Closeness of Materials*, reminded me pleasantly of Salvatore Sciarrino. But the music ends before much of a shape has been established.

Receiving its New York premiere was Petr Bakla’s *WAF* for piano and tenor sax. Reminiscent of Shih’s work, the piece blurrily taps up and down the chromatic scale without quite doing enough to compensate for the inevitable intervallic monotony. But timbrally the piece is attractive. Jason Eckardt’s *Tangled Loops* for piano and soprano sax is an extravagant, virtuoso work with some sumptuous dissonances and out-of-this-world passage-work; but the composition’s block-like construction seems at odds with the very pregnant material with which Eckhardt fills the sections.

Charles Wuorinen’s *Divertimento* is a great piece, and I don’t feel the need to comment about it here (again), other than to say I felt the Kenners’ performance brought out wonderfully the music’s emotional contrasts. But hands down the best work on the program was Toru Takemitsu’s stunning *Distance* for soprano sax and off-stage accordion. The saxophone’s wild outbursts of multiphonic music dance over an accordion drone which, somehow, manages to foreground and expand upon the on-stage solo. Imaginative, clear-eyed, and intensely emotional, the piece was also the most convincingly paced work on the program. Its progress felt both surprising and inevitable. Let us hope The Kenners themselves enjoy a similarly successful progress.

-David Savage, *Sequenza 21*