

Humor in 'Taking Sides' premiere

BY MARK STRYKER • FREE PRESS MUSIC CRITIC • APRIL 15, 2008

The Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings have a prolific history of commissioning new music. Sunday's performance of Matthew Tommasini's "Taking Sides" was the 21st world premiere commission in the ensemble's 26 seasons.

The composers have been an interesting lot. DCWS has generally steered clear of known quantities in favor of young composers, mid-career foot soldiers and local voices -- a representative sample includes Eric Ewazen, David Dzubay, Wayne State's James Hartway and Detroit jazz pianist Kenn Cox.

Of course, a Pulitzer Prize winner is going to cost more than an unknown 30-year-old, but mission has been more important than economics. Beyond homegrown musicians performing at the highest level and a commitment to the glorious byways of the literature, DCWS is about building an ecosystem for the music from the ground up.

It's significant that several of its commissions have found spots in the contemporary wind repertoire and that the careers of such composers as Ewazen, Dzubay and Evan Chambers have received wider acclaim since their Detroit premieres. To put it another way, a celebrity composer like John Corigliano doesn't need another commission. But Tommasini, a promising 29-year-old who recently finished his doctorate in composition at the University of Michigan, could use a break.

Most notable about "Taking Sides" -- the first product of a consortium of DCWS, U-M and Oberlin Conservatory promising three new works -- is that the piece is a comedy. Humor is an overlooked tool in classical music, partly because it's not perceived as dignified and partly because, as in everything else, it's hard to be funny. Inspired by political debates, Tommasini has written a 15-minute parable

for solo trombone, octet (oboes, clarinets, horns and bassoons split into two mirror quartets), piano, bass and percussion.

The trombone is cast as a moderator with the quartets as warring candidates and the other players as observer-referees. The music is tonal, tart, jazzy and frequently cartoonish -- think Shostakovich crossed with Carl Stalling, the guy who scored vintage Bugs Bunny cartoons. The opening movement, "Dysfunction," features a chugging, vaudevillian rhythm in the piano and bass, with the trombonist announcing melodic ideas that are immediately shouted down by the quartets in a crunch of dissonance.

"Reflection" suggests a modern jazz ballad. The trombone sings a lovely song over moody harmony and quiet stasis of vibes, piano and pizzicato bass. The final "Consensus" brings back call-and-response between trombone and octet, except the syncopated dialogue now resolves in harmony, the figures locking into a minimalist groove.

It's all great fun, though the language is so eclectic I had a hard time putting my finger on Tommasini's own voice. The score was not quite as transparent as it might have been, but the piece communicated its argument-resolution trajectory even if you weren't privy to the program. And the chuckles were earned.

Trombonist Ava Ordman was a charismatic soloist, and conductor H. Robert Reynolds led a crisp performance.

Elsewhere, the ensemble tackled music by Beethoven, Antonio Cartellieri and Jean Baptiste Loeillet with typically stylish virtuosity and expression. Oboist Don Baker deserves special praise for a jaunty and lyrical account of Loeillet's baroque C Major Sonata.