

Vetta's Energy, Unity Delight

MUSIC

Vetta Chamber Music Society

At West Point Grey United Church on Friday, October 5

• By KERRY REGIER

There are times when Vancouver seems like a musical desert, but the first Vetta Chamber Music concert of this season finished off that silly notion. A varied, interesting, original program, brilliantly played, in an acoustically superb setting: what more could a music lover possibly want?

In fact, there was more. Violinist Victor Costanzi, who shares the artistic directorship of Vetta with cellist Eugene Osadchy, began with a brief spoken introduction to the three works on the program. Costanzi has a very warm stage presence, personal and intimate, and he knows how to say enough to be well worth hearing, but not so much that listeners start wondering when the music will start.

Franz Schubert's rarely heard *Adagio and Rondo* for piano quartet opened the program. As Costanzi noted in his comments, the piano dominates, with the strings relegated to little more than basic accompaniment. Schubert was in his late teens when he wrote this piece and it has the charm of many of his youthful works—although it is otherwise very slight, only hinting at the depth and the marvellous tunes of his later chamber music. Still, it was worth hearing, especially when played with the convincing enthusiasm and energy the Vetta players gave it.

Costanzi and Osadchy played Zoltán Kodály's *Duo for Violin and Cello* next. It's a very challenging work, dark and brooding. This music, like the writings of the French existentialists, squarely faces an impersonal, lonely universe, but it's intended to be more life-affirming than terrifying. In Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus*, the fictional post-Mahlerian composer Adrian Leverkühn says that to write profound music it is absolutely essential to first understand light music. People have filled books discussing this, but I think that, put simply, it means it's impossible to communicate profoundly about human affairs without at least a little human sense of delight—perhaps even of *fun*. Mann's Leverkühn was speaking in particular about Johann Strauss waltzes, but the same is true for any artist. Kodály focused on the folksongs of Central Europe, which often have a peculiar bitter or lamenting quality that can be heard in Strauss's best music, and also a wild sense of enjoying life. That's the heart of

Kodály's *Duo*: it is utterly serious in intent, but like the Fool in *King Lear*, it's still fun, however disturbing it may be. All this digression is to say that Costanzi and Osadchy managed to capture that complexity in Kodály's music. They took risks of coarse tone in places to make rhetorical points, and often used romantic swellings and portamento slides between notes that could have been mistaken for sentimentality; but the unity and strength of the result were worth it.

Gabriel Fauré's *Piano Quartet in G minor* finished the evening. Quite different from the Kodály, it's a much more elegant work, though still dark and shadowy. Usually this piece is played to emphasize the French elegance of its melodies, but the Vetta players brought a scale and power suggestive at times, strangely, of Sergei Rachmaninoff. Their forceful, dramatic approach worked astonishingly well. The emphatically played climactic gestures of the last movement in particular pointed to a craggy side of Fauré I've never heard before.

A few minor quibbles. Costanzi played the Kodály duo standing up. Because a featured soloist usually stands while surrounded by seated players, this had the psychological effect of shifting the balance of attention in favour of the violin. That's one reason why string quartets never play standing up, since it would upstage the poor cello player, although I should emphasize that it would be wrong to say that Costanzi upstaged Osadchy.

And although I very much enjoyed and appreciated Costanzi's forthright, plain, and clear introduction, I hope he will forgive me for saying that up there on-stage in his fine suit, with his handheld microphone, he looked just a bit like a revivalist preacher or county-fair auctioneer. Costanzi has an excellent speaking voice, clear and powerful, and he probably doesn't need to use the microphone to reach the back stalls in the relatively small environment and excellent acoustics of West Point Grey United. It might be a bit of a challenge for Costanzi to speak without a microphone for his Vetta introductions, but maybe it would be worth a try.

But these are quibbles. It was a great concert, and I'm looking forward to more.

Vox Femina

A Vancouver New Music presentation. At the Vancouver East Cultural Centre on Friday and Saturday, October 5 and 6

• By ALEXANDER VARTY

Reviewing concerts of free-improvised music can be both dauntingly difficult and remarkably easy. It's hard because there are no objective standards: this music has never been

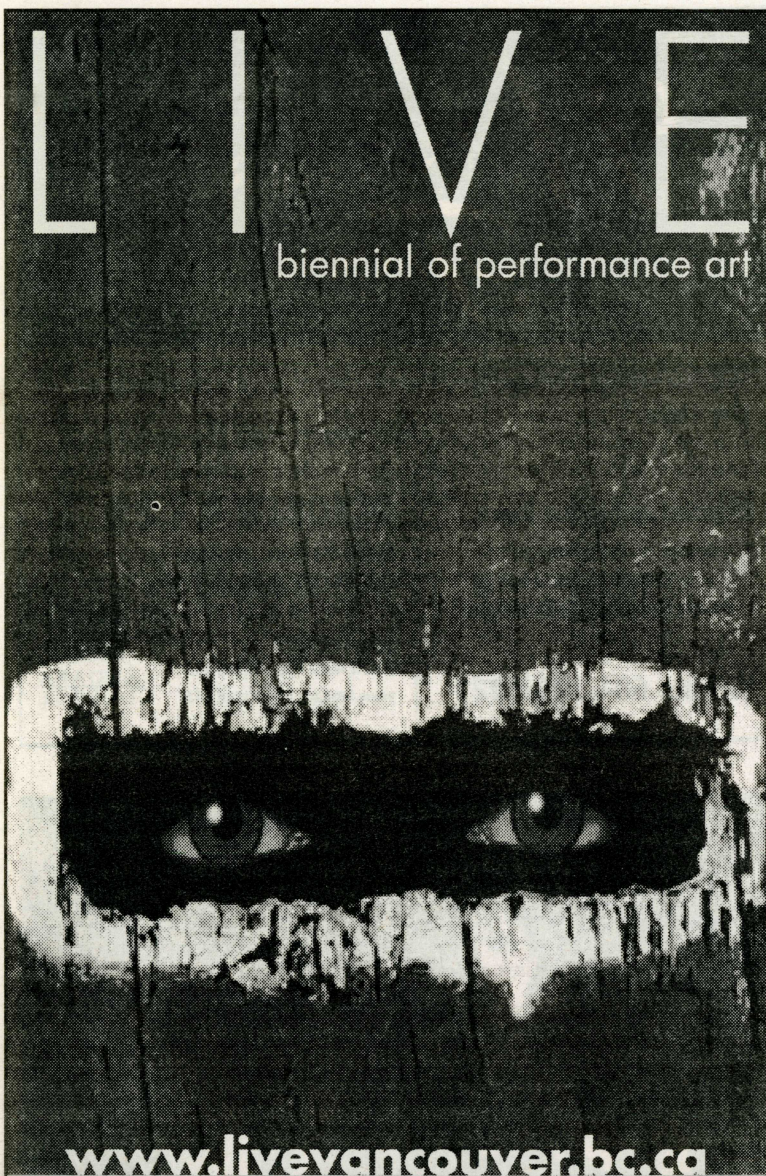
heard before, so you have nothing with which to compare it—as opposed to a classical-music concert, where you can always refer back to the Berlin Philharmonic version of whichever Ludwig van Beethoven symphony is being performed, or a pop show, which aims to replicate the aesthetic ideal of the studio hit. On the other hand, the easiest and most honest way to review improvisational music is to simply describe what went on as you heard it. This music is so extremely subjective in its impact that the only meaningful way to apprehend it is through the lens of personal experience.

So let me tell you what I heard at the Cultch on Saturday (October 6), in the final concert of Vancouver New Music's Vox Femina mini-series. The occasion was the first-ever (and apparently unrehearsed) meeting of local cellist Peggy Lee, Montreal-based clarinetist Lori Freedman, and Czech violinist Iva Bittová—an inspired combination of performers in theory, but in practice a curiously unengaging flop.

In truly great improvisational performances, the musicians are often capable of finding an uncanny unity, coursing through the music as if of one mind. Here, though, the dominant theme was a kind of subdued struggle: while Bittová kept trying to nudge the flow toward song, Lee was bent on maintaining an abstract, timbrally oriented approach. Freedman seemed pulled between these two poles, playing melodically one moment, then rubbing the bell of her clarinet against the floor to provide grainy percussion. Sometimes, perhaps out of frustration, she grabbed her bass clarinet and let out loudly declamatory passages of sustained notes; these were among the most gripping moments of the show.

The other two performers had their strengths: Bittová has found such synergy between her voice and her violin that it's sometimes difficult to tell them apart, while Lee's exploration of small sounds—the noises made when one runs the bow lightly up and down over the strings—showed true focus. But the trio as a whole was less than coherent, and after less than an hour the performance came to a halting, indecisive close. There was no encore, which seemed telling.

Bittová was much more engaging on the previous night, in a solo performance that was laced with magic. I could do without her on-stage mugging; at points she resembled a mildly demonic version of a clownish children's TV host. But she has a lovely, emotive sound, whether she's singing or playing, strumming out prog-rock rhythms or delving into the Central European traditions she grew up with. Sometimes, truly, less is more. ■



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