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The soprano Lucy Shelton with the Da Capo Chamber Players

MUSIC REVIEW

**An Evening of George Perle, a Practitioner of the Rigidly Random**

By ALLAN KOZINN

With Elliott Carter, at 96, getting so many performances of his works these days, some of his equally deserving junior colleagues have been overlooked. The Da Capo Chamber Players took a step toward remedying that on Monday evening at Merkin Concert Hall, with a program largely devoted to the music of George Perle, whose 90th birthday is on May 6.

Mr. Perle, like many of his generation's most serious composers, saw an irresistible logic in serialism -- a style in which works are created from predetermined series of pitches, rhythms and other elements -- and he used its techniques to drive his own works. He also wrote several useful books on the subject, and on the music of Alban Berg, one of its principal early practitioners. So it was fitting that the rest of the Da Capo program was devoted to music of Schoenberg, who invented serialism although all the Schoenberg the group played predated that revolution.

One thing that separated Mr. Perle from so much of the serialist pack was that his music, whether serial or not, is driven by a deeply expressive and often lyrical impulse. Curiously and, as it turned out, interestingly the Da Capo players avoided works in which Mr. Perle's lyricism was especially evident. Instead, they illuminated his humorous, playful side in performances that were consistently agile and transparent.

His "Critical Moments" (1996) and "Critical Moments 2" (2001), are collections of aphoristic movements in which flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano and percussion exchange piquant thematic fragments.

The most striking thing about these sets (the first includes six movements, the second has nine) is the economy with which Mr. Perle uses timbre and gesture to create distinct characterizations. A flute or clarinet line may scamper over a piano ostinato until a brief percussion figure acts as a punctuation mark. The sharp sound of the marimba is offset by the gentler tone of the vibraphone. A toneless burst of wind, in a flute line, alternates with a waltzy figure in the other instruments.

Mr. Perle used similar animation techniques, but couched in grander gestures, in his Sonata for Cello and Piano (1985), to which André Emilianoff, the cellist, and Blair McMillen, the pianist, gave a deft, spirited reading. The gestures of the cello line often seem like those of an actor: they describe both attitude and action. They also meet more standard expectations -- clarity of form, for one, and instrumental virtuosity.

Two of Mr. Perle's early vocal works, settings of Rilke's "Du meine heilige Einsamkeit" and "Der Bach hat leise Melodien" (1941), were set beside a group of Schoenberg's turn-of-the-century songs. Lucy Shelton sang them all with a warmth that bridged the nearly half a century between them. And on the second half of the program, Ms. Shelton and the Da Capo musicians gave a hair-raising, theatrical account of Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire."