

Works by Spencer Holst and Tui St. George Tucker at the Pleiades
Gallery

(reviewed by Jackson Mac Low)

On 22 February 1980 at the Pleiades Gallery, 152 Wooster St., a program of prose works by Spencer Holst and related musical works by Tui St. George Tucker were presented by Mr. Holst and the recorderists Pete Rose and David Carp. Mr. Holst began the program by reading his early (ca. 1950) story "Bullfinch and Goblin,"* which tells how a bullfinch took singing lessons from a goblin, becoming a superb singer-- but also turning into a goblin in the process. At the end the bullfinch-in-goblin-form is singing wonderfully on the windowsill of the children he had wanted to impress, but he's frightening them away instead. His song is reflected in Tui St. George Tucker's "Sonata for Solo Recorder," subtitled "The Bullfinch" (Brooklyn: Anfor Music Publishing, 1970), which Mr. Rose played on the alto recorder after Mr. Holst read the story.

The Sonata is a virtuoso work employing several kinds of musical materials including baroque-like and romantic passages, a very short waltz passage in homage to Schoenberg, quotes from Strauss's "Til Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks," rapid changes from diatonicism to chromaticism, multiphonics, and notably a number of passages including quarter tones, for which the composer gives special fingerings in the Anfor edition. (Indeed, in this dual publication, comprising both the Sonata and her "Romanza for Solo Recorder," which also includes quarter tones, she published an "Alto Recorder Fingering Chart Showing Quarter Tones" that gives fingerings for all 63 tones approximately a quarter tone apart, from the ~~F4~~ F4 above Middle C through the C4 three octaves above Middle C.)

Mr. Rose, who is no stranger to the Sonata, surmounted its technical difficulties with seeming effortlessness, subordinating his

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* (The Language of Cats; New York: McCall, 197

great virtuosity to the task of clearly expressing the many nuances of feeling and changes of mood that rapidly succeed each other in this short but complex romantic work.

Mr. Rose's virtuosity was taxed even further by the rest of the program: two sections from "There Are Different Kinds of Writing": Part One, Second Half and Part Two, First Half. TADKW comprises many short "movements" alternately for reader and recorderist(s).

The work stemmed from the fact that Mr. Holst accumulated over about 20 years (1959-79) more than 101 story beginnings which he never expanded into full-length stories. These beginnings, seldom more than two or three sentences long--possibly just because they are unexpanded kernels that might have grown into longer works--are in themselves highly evocative prose poems. Most of them contain striking images, phrases, and situation ideas. Some phrases I noted down during the concert are: "preserved Neanderthals," "snow leopards escape on the way to the Cincinnati zoo," "key--lighthousekeeper," "falling cucumbers--French peasant revolt," "lake belongs to the fox," "avalanche," "archeologists--jewels--how different were the smiles of the ancient kings," "the fish tried to imagine how the devil he could climb the string," "plants flying," and "the fur flag of the Alaskan nationalists."

Sixty-four of these beginnings were published in Mr. Holst's book Spencer Holst Stories (New York, Horizon Press, 1976) under the general title "The Pleasures of the Imagination," and previously 23 had been published in the magazine Some/Thing. In addition, several slightly different groups of 55 had been read as part of the dance-prose event "Small Visions," choreographed and danced ~~by~~ at a number of ~~sixty~~ places by Sally Gross. In the course of the two decades some beginnings were added and some dropped from the collection.

3/ Holst-St, Geo. Tucker concert/ Pleiades (Mac Low)

The final TADKW consists of 101 beginnings divided in three parts comprising ~~mf~~^{mf} 54, 42, and seven respectively. At the Pleiades Mr. Holst read the last 26 from Part 1 and the first 21 from Part 2.

For each of the 52 beginnings in Part 1, Ms. St. George Tucker composed a very short piece for bass recorder. These works employ an immense gamut of musical materials and recorder techniques, including quarter tones, multiphonics, and a host of special trill and other fingerings. In contrast with the Sonata and the Romanza, which include quarter tones within a largely diatonic/chromatic contexts, these works are truly quarter-tone melodies. The composer herself recorded this group of 52, with Mr. Holst reading one of his 52 beginnings before each bass recorder solo, for the New Wilderness Audiographics cassette-tape series (tape no. 7703C).

At the Pleiades, after the Bullfinch^c and Gold^obins story and the alto recorder solo sonata, Mr. Rose performed, and Mr. Holst read, the 26 bass recorder pieces ~~xx~~ and prose beginnings comprising the second half of Part 1 of TADKW. (They began with a procession through the audience to the performance area, during which Mr. Rose performed a variant on one of the pieces.)

After the intermission Mr. Rose was joined by David Carp, who is another extraordinary recorderist^{ed} who has mastered Ms. St. George Tucker's quarter-tone, multiphonic, and other special recorder techniques. They played, and Mr. Holst read, the 21 short recorder duos and prose beginnings that comprise the first half of Part 2 of TADKW. The recorderists played many different combinations of the five sizes of recorders--ranging from bass to soprano--currently in use.

Those of us who had previously heard Ms. St. George Tucker and/or Mr. Rose play the bass recorder pieces of part 1 (as well as having

4/Holst-St. Geo. Tucker concert/Pleiades (Mac Low)

heard Ralph Zeitlin and/or Mr. Rose play the Sonata) and had thought that the limits of recorder virtuosity and expressiveness employing quarter tones, multiphonics, and other innovative techniques and means had been reached in those works were in for a surprise. A whole new dimension was added; that of quarter-tone counterpoint!

What was really surprising was the utter "naturalness" of the contrapuntal textures produced by the various combinations of two recorders playing quarter-tone melodies interspersed with multiphonics. As moving and interesting as are the bass recorder solos of Part 1, these short duos are possibly the most beautiful works for two recorders written in this century. The quarter tones, while continually refreshing the ears with their unaccustomed frequencies, never seemed to call attention to themselves as something special. Tui St. George Tucker, following her chosen path as a modern romantic composer (in the best sense of the phrase), has used the many innovative means she has developed in the service of emotional expressiveness appropriate to Mr. Holst's poetically moving prose beginnings. They have produced a collaborative ^{mosaic} ~~work~~ embracing both ~~the prose and the recorder~~ the short prose pieces and the short recorder solos and duos--somehow creating a unified work out of what might have ~~been~~ been merely a series of disparate sections.

I have learned that presently the composer is at ^{work on seven} ~~the~~ more pieces connected with Mr. Holst's seven remaining and slightly longer prose beginnings. I am looking forward to hearing all 101 prose beginnings and 101 quarter-tone recorder pieces that comprise the whole of "There Are Different Kinds of Writing." I am also looking forward to hearing some of the quarter-tone piano music--for two pianos tuned a quarter tone apart--that Tui St. George Tucker had ^{been} been composing during the last decade. / Jackson Mac Low 3/12/80