

By Backward Steps
Presented by Vancouver New
Music
April 8, 2001
Vancouver East Cultural
Centre
by Colin MacDonald

In a concert recognizing the contributions of one of Vancouver's long-standing composers and conductors of new music, we were given an intimate look at the work of Owen Underhill.

Underhill's music is characterized by angular melodies with wide, leaping intervals, set against a background of a complex and shifting tonality. There is a feeling of exploration, of searching for something unattainable, as textures and phrases are taken up and transformed, recombined, and abandoned. The work has an improvisational quality, with pieces inspired by fleeting images, dreamlike impressions.

A duo for harp and violin, *By Backward Steps*, was by turns tender and passionate, with leaping melodies that attempted to embrace the full range of each instrument. Rita Costanzi's intensity on the harp was matched by the dramatic, if somewhat imprecise, violin playing of Mary Sokol Brown.

Underhill himself performed on his *Two Songs Without Words*, for piano and vibraphone, and an extra dimension was added with the appearance of three dancers, choreographed by Ballet BC's John Alleyne. The activity of the dance counterpointed the relative stasis of the *Songs*, but the collaboration seemed a bit forced, as the musicians gave themselves too much restraint in accompanying the dance, and the sounds came across as stiff and mechanical.

The Geometry of Harmony was given its premiere on this program, written expressly for the members of the Vancouver New Music Ensemble. On this newest work, a kind of chamber concerto featuring each member of the octet as a soloist in separate movements, Underhill displayed a lighter, humorous side of his character, and he obviously had a great deal of fun writing for a group of musicians that he trusted and respected. The music was energetic and rhythmic, and you could see how much Underhill was enjoying the performance as his animated conducting drove the performers on with increasing zeal.

Not one to hog the spotlight, Underhill gave over the first half of the evening to other composers, and the first work of the night was by far the most interesting. David Lang's *The Anvil Chorus* was music for the industrial age, the sounds of assembly lines and mechanical construction. Nicholas Coulter commanded a one-man percussion ensemble of various pieces of metal, confidently layering complex patterns into melodies of rhythm and colour.

It's not uncommon for contemporary composers to include elements of improvisation in their compositions, so it wasn't a great surprise to hear *Play Signals*, a free improvisation by drummer Dylan van der Schyff and trumpeter Brad Turner, but I have to question its inclusion in this context. There is no question that Turner and Van der Schyff are both world-class performers, and they respond to each others' playing with openness and sensitivity, but their music is obviously informed by the traditions of American jazz, and not by the lineage of European classical music. It may be a sign of the times that the distinction between new classical music and avant-jazz is breaking down, but on

this particular evening it just
seemed like filler.