

Alea III debuts at Boston University

by **ARTHUR S. KANARACUS**

The recent debut of Alea III, an ensemble in residence at Boston University conducted by Theodore Antoniou, professor of music there, added a valuable dimension to the musical experience found in Boston with its superb performance of outstanding modern and contemporary works.

The valuable dimension can be seen when contrasted to, for instance, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the BSO, with the exception of an occasional avant-garde piece like Mananagatis' "Anarchia," sticks to the tried and true because, as it has been proven, it's safer to play what the audience likes to hear. This isn't meant to be harsh criticism, since such practice among orchestras is not new. Beethoven was banned because he had not begun his first symphony on a traditional

beat, and when Stravinsky was first played at Symphony Hall, many in the audience walked out. So who can blame current conductors from doing otherwise.

The implications of the Beethoven and Stravinsky tales, however, is what could lead one to a performance by an ensemble like Alea III, which offers a totally new sound in orchestral and vocal music.

I hear about the Alea III concert only the night before the performance, while attending a production by the Worcester Orchestra under David Epstein. The orchestra's program included works by Vivaldi, Haydn and Bruch, whose "Violin Concerto in G Minor" works long in the standard repertory and was beautifully played. The jump from classical to contemporary style, however, did not disturb me, and though it was

discordant, it was still music to my ears.

With these few thoughts out of the way, let me turn to the Alea III's program. The first half of the program consisted of folklore music, "Five Greek Dances" by Skalkotas (1908-1949), and "Folk Songs" by Luciano Berio (b. 1926).

Skalkotas studied with Schoenberg, who called him an outstanding student. He developed a very personal and original use of the 12 tone system.

Skalkotas has written various sets of Greek dances for different combinations of instruments. In these he followed the system of harmonization, advocated also by George Lambelot in his very valuable book, "Folk Music of Greece." The largest number of Skalkotas' dances on one recording was made by Gregory Millar and the San Francisco Little Symphony. On the Fantasy (5002) label, Mitropoulos also recorded four of his dances for Columbia (ML 5335). The dances on this program were scored for string orchestra and on hearing them one had the urge to get up and dance. They were fervently played.

Luciano Berio's 12 folk songs from six countries gave Cheryl Bensenman, a mezzo soprano, the opportunity to display a beautiful voice that reflected the gaiety or sadness of each song.

"Three Pieces for Orchestra" by Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) are very short, 12 measures, four short phrases, eight measures, respectively. However, each measure or phrase is marked to be played differently. They are important because they are stylistically different from Schoenberg's other music of the time and show his development of a solo instrumental style far earlier than was heretofore believed.

Gunther Schuller's "Duo Sonata for Clarinet and Bass Clarinet" is, according to program notes, "an example of beautiful writing for clarinet." It was also an opportunity to hear the bass clarinet as a solo

instrument, a rare event indeed. Julie Vaverka on clarinet and Diane Heffner on bass clarinet, played with the taste and great finesse.

"Ni bruit ni vitesse" by Lukas Foss (b. 1922) is composed for two pianos and four players. Two players are at the keyboard and two stand beside the open case and pluck the strings as on a harp. This was a very interesting and exciting work because of (among other things) the contrast of struck notes with the glissando and pizzicato effects of the strings.

The last work was Edgar Varese's (1883-1965) "Ionisation" which as the title may suggest is the attempt to describe the ionisation of matter by the use of 40 percussion instruments played by 13 musicians. According to the notes: "In this work Varese creates a multidimensional universe in which space is defined by many different textures and timbral combinations, arranged in blocks and levels of sound rather than by such traditional means as thematic statements and development."

I heard the work back in the 1930s on a 75 rpm recording. It impressed me then, and it impresses me now. To me, it is a dynamic work that builds up gradually into a fullness of sound that becomes so fascinating that one overcomes the idea that percussive sounds are not musical. The listener is caught up in the whirlwind of sound and carried away by the energetic and rhythmic reverberations.

Antoniou, a fervent proponent of contemporary music and a composer of contemporary music himself, conducted the works masterfully, sensitive to and appreciative of what the works had to offer.

An audience of about 500 at Boston University's Concert Hall applauded the performers and the conductor long and enthusiastically. They left no doubt that Alea III has a definite place in the musical life of Boston.



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Alea III
concert
at BU
Post concert report
Hellenic Chronicle

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