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Music Review | Orchestra of the League of Composers

## The Debut of the Players Who Honor the Writers

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

The debut of an orchestra during bad economic times is good news. So there was much to celebrate at the Miller Theater on Wednesday night when the Orchestra of the League of Composers gave its inaugural performance. The League has been promoting contemporary music for 85 years and has long sponsored a sizable chamber ensemble. With this concert, it introduced a 37-piece orchestra and got back into the business of commissioning works.

If those who care about contemporary music know little about the League of Composers/I.S.C.M. (the International Society for Contemporary Music), they are not alone. Take, for example, the young composer Christopher Dietz, who won the League's Composers Competition last year. During an onstage interview before the performance of his prize piece, when asked by John Schaefer, the announcer from WNYC radio, whether he knew about the League's activities during his student days, Mr. Dietz sheepishly answered that he didn't know as much as "some people in the audience would like me to say."

Fortunately, also in attendance was Elliott Carter, whose intricately complex, lyrically sensual song cycle for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, "In the Distances of Sleep" (2006) — settings of poems by Wallace Stevens — was presented on this program in an arresting performance featuring the luminous and intelligent singing of Kate Lindsey.

Mr. Carter knows all and, at 100, had nothing to lose by being blunt. In the early decades the League and the Society were friendly rivals. Aaron Copland ran the League and promoted the composers "he liked and approved," Mr. Carter said, when interviewed by Mr. Schaefer. So that is why "we," Mr. Carter added, meaning composers with less populist inclinations, became involved with the American branch of the Society.

This is a complicated story, and Mr. Carter only touched on it. Though Copland never formally ran the League of Composers, by the mid-1930s he was the power behind it. He saw its mission as fostering distinctively American music and finding ways to connect with the general public. The Society tended to champion the international contemporary composers who practiced complex styles, including 12-tone technique, and explored new dimensions of sound and rhythm, those whom Virgil Thomson derided as the "Schoenbergians and the Bang-Bangs."

In any event, both organizations fought for the cause of contemporary music and in 1953 joined forces. Wednesday's concert, with the debut of the orchestra, represents a new burst of activity for the League/I.S.C.M. The orchestra, conducted expertly by the composer Louis Karchin, sounded terrific in this varied and demanding program.

It began festively with Britten's "Fanfare for St. Edmundsbury," a short work for three trumpets and a lesson for young composers in how to write an interesting piece for a public occasion. Mr.

Dietz's 10-minute "Gharra" was an elemental, atmospheric score in which slinky themes and combative voices struggle to break free of an engulfing, dense, harmonically murky orchestral maze.

Alvin Singleton's "After Choice," one of two commissioned premieres on the program, was an engaging work for string orchestra in which mysterious yet playful plucked lines are juxtaposed with fitful, spiraling yet oddly calm legato lines.

Julia Wolfe's "Vermeer Room" is inspired by Vermeer's painting "A Girl Asleep," which depicts a young woman sitting at a table, dozing, her head propped up by her hand. But from Ms. Wolfe's agitated, harmonically gnashing, brightly colorful score, the sleeping girl is having fitful daydreams.

The concert ended with the premiere of Charles Wuorinen's 20-minute "Synaxis," a boldly complex and texturally transparent work for four solo instruments and orchestra. In its uncompromising way, the music recalls the concertato pieces of Stravinsky. The soloists played brilliantly: Robert Ingliss (oboe), Alan R. Kay (clarinet), Patrick Pridemore (horn), and Timothy Cobb (double bass). That the orchestra dispatched Mr. Wuorinen's challenging piece with such vibrant authority boded well for the future of this new ensemble.