

## **SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL CONCERT REVIEW**

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String Quartets of Toshio Hosokawa: JACK Quartet, Austrian Cultural Forum, New York City, 8.10.2009 (BH)

Urbilder (1980)

Silent Flowers (1999)

Blossoming (2007)

6 Kalligraphie (2007)

Despite the Internet and modern music distribution systems, many composers have much higher profiles outside the United States, and Toshio Hosokawa is a prime example. But thanks to Michael Karning, head of Music, Dance and Performance at the Austrian Cultural Forum, the JACK Quartet offered this enthralling evening to introduce New Yorkers to Hosokawa's gorgeously detailed sound world.

As part of my research into his work (since I had the great pleasure of interviewing Hosokawa during a break between the evening's two halves), I watched a DVD of *Circulating Ocean* from 2005, and premiered that year by Valery Gergiev and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at the Salzburg Festival. (The UK premiere was at the 2006 Proms, with Kazushi Ono leading the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.)

Scored for a very large ensemble, it is a vast panorama of tightly clustered sounds, evoking water in all its guises, as the ocean becomes vaporous, rises to a hurricane, and then rains, returning the water to its elemental form. The performance is breathtaking; rarely have I heard the distinctively silken sounds of this ensemble's instruments used to such ravishing effect. The camerawork also reveals an amusing detail: Gergiev conducting with a toothpick.

These four string quartets are equally compelling. Hosokawa studied with Isang Yun and Helmut Lachenmann, and the influence of the latter is immediately apparent in *Urbilder* (1980), with its agitated droplets of sound hurling themselves against each other. Glissandi intertwine with accented notes and silence, reaching a zenith of softly intoned high frequencies. Written 19 years later, *Silent Flowers* shows an artist finding his voice even more confidently, with more intensity, and with even more subtle use of extended techniques. Violent tremolos and trills wash up against blocks of microtonal bliss, again framed by silences.

Almost ten years later, Hosokawa wrote *Blossoming* (2007), which begins with a bustling texture, a bouquet of thousands of details, before delicate glissandi begin to circle and take

over. As the piece winds to its close, it seems to settle on more peaceful aerial motion, before the sound disappears, pianissimo, somewhere high up on the staff. The same year produced 6 Kalligraphie, whose title references the composer's love of brush strokes used in Japanese writing. Perhaps more than in the other three quartets, this one asks the musicians to plunge into whirlwinds of gesture and color, but its six discrete sections grow from and recede into quietude.

During our talk, Hosokawa also brought forth a touching image of a flower (the music), sprouting from the mud (the composer). He sees the latter as the vehicle essential to birth, an element of nature crucial to the creation of beautiful things. Just as his orchestral work draws upon the natural world for its splendor, his quartets find both drama and peace in organic growth and metamorphosis.

Throughout the hour long program (all four works are roughly 15 minutes each), the JACK Quartet could not have been more involved, each member listening with acute attention to the other three. As one measure of success, the audience was one of the quietest I've heard in months, clearly gripped by what they were hearing. These are difficult, intensely conceived scores, requiring every last shred of communicative skill and technique, so imagine my shock when the musicians mentioned that they had learned these daunting scores in about three weeks. Once again, I can only shake my head in awe at their talent for tackling works that might easily cause tremors in those confronted with the challenges of realizing the fauna in this composer's delicate garden. Hosokawa joined the JACK musicians onstage for a prolonged ovation, well-deserved, and I will now officially start the petition for a recording.