MUSIC

CLASSICAL

"Recent works by nine emerging composers ..."

by Alan Wells

NEW MUSIC is booming in New Zealand. The Victoria University School of Music's mini-festival *Sonic Boom* gave ample evidence of this. The two concerts of recent works by nine emerging composers showed a wide range of personal styles and distinctive responses to the challenges of composition.

One of this "new generation" already well established is current Mozart Fellow, Martin Lodge. His Sonatina for Solo Flute/Piccolo was severely linear even for this medium, making virtually no use of flute multiphonics. Flutist Alexa Still highlighted the expressive quarter-tones in the slow movement, however, and in the brief scherzo the piccolo was given scope to show itself as an instrument with a character of its own. Nigel Keay's *Triptych* was also typically linear, although the power and rich harmonic spectrum of brass gave the trio of trumpet, horn and trombone a density that suggested a much larger ensemble.

Most of the performances were premieres. Many scores had been specially commissioned. A few betrayed the strain involved in expanding to fill a predetermined time-length. Andra Patterson's *Sextet*, for example, went on for too long with little development of the recurring motifs and with no sections of a contrasting texture. Length aside, it was an enjoyable romp in cross-cultural minimalism.

Patterson turned to Indonesia for her material. Kim Dyett looked to the western tradition, in *Wallpaper Music*, an electro-acoustic collage of haunting fragments from Mahler and English lute song, witty juxtapositions of New Zealand politicians and other voices, and segments that were purely electronic. Though lacking a feeling of direction and overall shape, some of its moments remained insistently memorable.

So too did *The Frivolous Cake* by Helen Bowater. Mervyn Peake's nonsense poem was metrically simple, but mezzo Linden Loader projected its surrealistic imagery with aplomb against the more complex web woven by a varied group of instruments. It was Bowater's achievement that, in spite of the similarities, this *Pierrot Lunaire* without sprechstimme continued to sound like Bowater.

Ross Carey also managed to retain his individuality, even though his *Quintet*, with its extended passages in rhythmic unison and its sense of timelessness (especially in the slow movement), was somewhat reminiscent of Messiaen. Mark Langford, on the other hand, sounded like himself – indeed a little too much so. Parts of *When Owls Do Cry* seemed like direct quotes from his earlier *Mostly in B Flat*, where these ideas were energetically played out to their limits.

John Psathas also returned to his own past, after his excursion into orchestral writing last year. *Matre's Dance* resumed his characteristic style. Relentlessly motoric, except for a few well-judged moments of respite, the constant interplay between the instruments displayed both in a new light – Bruce McKinnon's drums provided melody as well as rhythm, while David Guerin's piano, sometimes struggling to make itself heard, acquired a brittle edge to the tone.

If Psathas drew the inspiration for his score from recent fiction, David Downes created his own abstract fictional narrative with sound, video image and filmed dance. A collaboration with choreographer Daniel Belton, *Questions, Reasons, Boundaries* was not sonically adventurous (the suspicion of synthesizer presets was often in the background), but the diverse media successfully reinforced each other. Much of the piece's interest developed from the contrast between the long slow takes and the abrupt transitions from one scene to the next.

It is perhaps worth noting that this "sonic boom" of creativity was supported by funding from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council and the New Zealand Composers Foundation as well as Victoria University. Wherever they draw their inspiration from, composers, too, still have to eat. ■