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A Meandering Thread Becomes James Joyce

Leon Botstein likes to raise eyebrows with the thematic programs he presents with the American Symphony Orchestra, and at a glance the subject of the orchestra's season

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**MUSIC
REVIEW**

opener at Carnegie Hall on Wednesday evening, James Joyce, may seem slightly quirky, since only one of the three works Mr. Botstein conducted made use of Joyce's writing.

But a musical pulse and symmetry suffuse Joyce's work, and his way of reconfiguring the English language has something in common, conceptually, with the way contemporary composers have treated notes, rhythms and timbres. That may explain why works like "Ulysses," "Finnegans Wake" and "Chamber Music" have inspired composers of many stripes, including John Cage, Stephen Albert, Nils Vigeland, Victoria Bond and Libby Larsen.

Some of their works could have enlivened Mr. Botstein's program considerably, but he had something different in mind. He devoted the first half to two composers whose music Joyce knew and admired, George Antheil and Othmar Schoeck, and the second half to Matyas Seiber's "Ulysses" (1947), an introspective, slightly dour setting of a fragment of Chapter 17 of Joyce's novel.

Seiber's dark, soft-edged orchestration suits the text, an obscure astronomical discussion between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus; the most interesting action, melodically and harmonically, occurs in the often involved, shimmering choral writing. Christian Reinert sang the solo tenor line in the calm, meditative manner that Joyce's hypnotic text seems to demand.

The Seiber proved more thought provoking than exciting. That could also be said of Othmar Schoeck's "Lebendig Begraben" (1926), a creepy 40-minute setting of Gottfried Keller's cycle of poems about being buried alive. Joyce heard the work during a visit to Zurich in 1935 and liked it so much that he sought out the composer.

There is much to admire in Schoeck's rich orchestral writing, which skirts tonality without diving into harshness, evokes the otherworldly state between life



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American Symphony Orchestra
Christian Reinert, tenor, singing
Seiber's "Ulysses" at Carnegie.

and death, and follows Keller's poetry in creating a state of wonder, rather than terror. Schoeck's vocal writing is less pleasing: much of it is talky and shapeless, and it is often swamped by the string and woodwind scoring. John Hancock, the baritone soloist, was seriously underpowered and only rarely projected the text. Presumably the performance that so impressed Joyce was better balanced.

Antheil's strongest connection to Joyce's work was his plan to write a "Ulysses" opera, a project Joyce endorsed. But the composer seems to have written down only three bars of music, and he was represented here by the "Ballet Mécanique" (1924), a product of the period when Antheil was pondering his "Ulysses" project.

Mr. Botstein, using Antheil's comparatively spare 1953 revision, led an ensemble of 4 pianists and 10 percussionists, including one who used a Mac laptop, probably to produce the sounds of the two airplane propellers called for in the score but nowhere to be seen on the stage. This is a piece that thrives on rhythmic interconnectedness, variety of timbre and surprising changes of texture, and the vital performance by Mr. Botstein's musicians (augmented by percussionists from New York University) was the evening's clear highlight.