Fleeting contemporary tones more elusive than abstract modern art

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is a lot of glass if she wanted to. There were for me more piercing and painful high notes here than in the previous piece, and I found both the words and the music unintelligible.

Gunther Schuller’s 1984 Piano Trio was refreshingly mild by comparison. It was scored for piano, viola and cello, and was therefore easier on the ear, although the pianist more than once got up and scratched the strings—It must be hard to play such non-melodic music, and I can’t imagine remembering such a piece in the way one can remember, say, a Mozart symphony (or even one by Salieri!).

After an intermission came the longest piece of the night, William Dompman’s Spring Songs for Soprano, Clarinet, Percussion and Piano (1981). The texts for this cycle came from Chaucer, Lennon, Robert Burns, Psalm XXII, Willa Doppmann, Shakespeare and Donald Justice.

I looked forward to this because the texts included some nice poems, and because I had the words in front of me. Unfortunately, it was just as wearing as the earlier song-cycle. It was also very annoying, because several innovations were clearly no more than unorthodoxy for unorthodoxy’s sake (e.g. singing into the piano, foot-stamping at odd moments, random shouts from the instrumentalists).

Occasionally a melody resurfaced, and the whispered excerpt from Psalm XXII was spooky and moving. But the piece was generally nasty. One of the worst parts was the over-dramatic and incredibly unnatural rendering of John Lennon’s nonsense room “I sat belonely”.

During the intermission, Schuller received an award and a testimonial from Governor Dukakis was read, lauding Schuller for his numerous contributions as a composer, conductor, educator, etc. It felt strange, seeing all these people appreciating this guy, of whose talent I had no understanding.

I tried, I really did. But I think that a lot of modern music (by which I refer to the direct successor of classical and romantic music, played by musicians from symphony orchestras, as distinguished from rock, folk, jazz, pop, and various fusions) is too much like modern abstract art.

Don’t get me wrong, I like abstract art. But whereas you can stare at, say, a Picasso, until it begins to make sense to you, you don’t have that option in listening to music, which is basically a linear experience. If I could somehow comprehend the whole piece at once, as the composer and (to the extent they practice) the performers do, I might appreciate it more. But I just can’t get it from a concert, and if it is actually pleasant to the ear I’m not going to listen to a record of it several times in order to understand it.

Maybe some people can “get it” just by listening. Maybe you need the right kind of training, or maybe you just have to have the right kind of brain. But I predict that this music will never be as popular as the music composed 100 and 200 years ago.

I don’t actually believe that the emperor has no clothes, I’m just saying I don’t see them, and I suspect he’s not actually wearing very much. (My wife Lise insists that at most he’s wearing a string around his knee and a sequin in his bellybutton, but I don’t think that so many people could be victims of such a huge humbug. I’ll accept that there’s something there, but I’m baffled that I can’t appreciate it.)

All right, Arts Editor, I’ve paid my dues. May I please have some Schubert next time? I’ll settle for Stravinsky. Just give me time to get over this earache.

Ouch.