

David Taylor

Outwardly Mobile Brass

BY LEIGHTON KERNER

Virtuosity's good name may be endangered from time to time when the classical-music market's vulnerability to commercial hyperbole confuses powerful interpretation with mere flash. Such confusion, however, is less likely to happen on the contemporary-music scene, where commercial hyperbole is confined, when it appears at all, to the most famous of minimalists, pseudominimalists, and multidirectional crossers-over. A recent concert that reaffirmed the prevailing integrity—box-office-conscious people might add “loneliness” to “integrity”—of contemporary-music virtuosity was given by bass trombonist David Taylor and collaborating musicians on February 28 at the 92nd Street Y.

Since the bass trombone, confined in customary classical-music circumstances to a rear corner of a symphony orchestra's stage, is not ordinarily thought of as a recital medium, it wasn't surprising

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that the Y's Kaufmann Concert Hall was only about half full for Taylor's concert. The program's venturesomeness and quality might have been trumpeted—or perhaps bass-tromboned—more loudly and perhaps have drawn something closer to a full house. Such a push would have been especially justified because the highest highlight of the evening was the first performance of George Perle's Sonata à cinque, which had been commissioned for Taylor by the Y itself. How

many other concert-hall managements in New York actually pay a composer to supply music these days? None, as far as I know.

The Perle sonata, as its title indicates, employs five players: clarinet in A with doubling on an E-flat and bass clarinet, violin, cello, bass trombone, and piano. Its four movements—“Initial,” “Perpetual Motion,” “Chorales and Diversions,” and “Dance”—slightly exceed a succinct 15 minutes, but each movement is generous in the characteristics of Perle's chamber music over the last decade or so: rhythmic and melodic grace, harmonic piquancy, textural variety, wit, and, at strategic points, heartfelt sentiment. The sentiment of the “Chorales and Diversions” section was particularly strong, for all its rapt pianissimos. The trombone's chantings over the hushed chorus of bass clarinet and strings are the movement's first image, and although other combinations and motivic shapes occur, most notably when the piano adds its tolling bass chords and treble flights, the changes and transformations richly complement that opening statement. Here's a piece destined to rival at least the current (relative) popularity of Perle's Pulitzer Prize-winning Wind Quintet No. 4, especially if subsequent players approach the sensitivity of its premiere performers.

The French title of Perle's piece suited the occasion, since the announced theme of the evening was French-American music. Erik Satie's *Musique d'ameublement*, intended to accompany audience conversation and milling about between acts of Max Jacob's play, *Ruffian toujours*,



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Bass trombonist David Taylor

trouand jamais (performed in 1920 as part of a Paris exhibition of children's drawings), got what may have been only its second performance since then—during the intermission of Taylor's concert. Satie had insisted that the audience not listen, and his music, for piano, three clarinets, and trombone, was played out in the lobby while we talked over coffee cups and through cigarette smoke. And its slangy allusions to Saint-Saëns and Ambroise Thomas, composers who had done their best to squelch Satie's career, not to mention its theme very like "Little

Brown Jug," proved fine for nonlistening. Then too, by way of an onstage encore, it was quite listenable.

The program also offered a 1978 score written for Taylor, *Moonrise With Memories* by Frederic Rzewski. Its three movements pit the bass trombone against a sextet whose instrumentation is prescribed only to the extent that the registration is as high as a normal oboe's so as to contrast sufficiently with the trombone. Taylor's colleagues the other night were Lawrence Feldman, Laura Flax, George Young (on assorted combinations of flute, clarinet, and saxophone), violinist Eric Wyrick, violist Katherine Rife, and harpist Emily Mitchell. The central movement musicalizes Langston Hughes's little poem, "World War II":

*What a grand time was the war!
my, my, my! my, oh my!
in war-time we had fun,
sorry that old war is done!
Did somebody die?*

The clear-voiced singer was Mitchell, and at the end of the third movement Hughes's last line was hummed, as prescribed, by Taylor through his trombone. The total work sounded like Rzewski at the top of his musical-political-emotional form.

And the total concert showed Taylor to be a consummate arranger as well as performer. Because the bass-trombone solo repertory is so small, of course, arrangements were to be expected, but not such an entertaining and deft exhibit as his linkage of songs and liturgical items (by Schütz, Ives, Ravel, and Ellington) with a peppery bass-trombone-and-tape piece by Eric Ewazen called *Dagon II* into a suite titled *Five Songs With Benediction and Divertissement*. Also consider Taylor's *French Suite*, derived from Milhaud, Honegger, and Ravel, where his nuances on the instrument came very near to those of a very stylish singer in that repertory. Here was virtuosity all ashine. ■