

A new masterpiece for horn trio marks Steven Gross' 25th season at UCSB

Review by **Daniel Kepl** / VOICE

STEVEN GROSS, PROFESSOR OF HORN and Head of the Wind, Brass and Percussion Areas at UC Santa Barbara, capped his 25th year on the faculty by commissioning a magnificent new *Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano* (2017) from iconic American composer William Bolcom. With colleagues Philip Ficsor violin and Constantine Finehouse piano (American Double) Gross gave the West Coast premiere of the work last Saturday at the Music Academy of the West. The world premiere took place at King Center Recital Hall, Denver in September 2018 with the same players.

American Double is not unknown to Santa Barbarans. Ficsor served on the Westmont College Music Department faculty for some years and is presently based in Denver. Finehouse is currently on the faculty of New England Conservatory Preparatory and Extension Divisions in Boston and has performed here often as Visiting Artist/Faculty at Westmont College. The two gained considerable critical notoriety in 2007 for their *Bolcom Project* two CD set of the composer's complete works for violin and piano. It was a natural fit for Gross to invite these experts to join him in preparing and recording the premiere of the new Bolcom *Horn Trio*. On the program as well, the composer's *Second Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1979), a movement from Jiri Havlik's *Concerto for Horn* (1976) and a fun opener, Václav Nelhybel's

Scherzo Concertante for Horn and Piano (1966).

Czech American composer Václav Nelhybel (1919-1996) is a favorite among brass and wind players for his wonderfully exciting use of folk tunes, catchy rhythms, massive sound structures, and unique modalities. His wide portfolio of works including dozens of masterpieces for concert band are well known, but Gross's choice of Nelhybel's *Scherzo Concertante for Horn and Piano* to open his program at Hahn Hall, immediately established



American Double - **Philip Ficsor** violin, **Constantine Finehouse** piano with **Steven Gross** French horn

the French horn as the heldentenor of the brass choir, capable of color and mood and texture beyond all other brass instruments. Demonstrating the amazing chops necessary to make the fickle beast behave, Gross made it clear that on a good night, humans can persevere over the instrument. Displaying stunning control, Gross invigorated every jolly Nelhybel riff with delicious bravado, collaborating pianist Constantine Finehouse adding wonderfully detached thus spacious accompaniment. The last moment of the piece, a testament to Gross's edgy understanding of the sound spectrum, shocked and satisfied. Virtuoso fun.

The *Molto lento* second movement of Havlik's *Concerto for Horn* arranged here for piano and horn

and performed in memory of Edna and Roy Gross, provided a pre-intermission meditative pause for the audience and offered Steven Gross the opportunity to pay tribute as well as canvas his mastery of the instrument's splendid colors, sound illusions, and expressive elasticity.

The program's compelling *raison d'être* and focus were two works of William Bolcom his amazing, puzzling, powerful, and utterly unique *Second Sonata for Violin and Piano* performed before intermission and Steven Gross' new Bolcom commission, the *Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano* which occupied the second half of the program exclusively; music of masterful construction and lyrical sensibility that will very shortly carve a giant niche for itself in the repertoire.

Placed in the middle of the first half of the program and performed by violinist Philip Ficsor from memory, Bolcom's *Second Sonata for Violin and Piano* was a joy to see and hear. Both Finehouse and Ficsor have made Bolcom's art theirs and after years of familiarity, live and recorded performances, thinking and re-thinking the four descriptive movements of the piece, the product heard last Saturday was a revelation; beauty and consciousness personified. As American as jazz and Charles Ives, the sonata's four movements are encyclopedic histories and world's in collision. A mass and jumble of contrasting albeit organized, emotions and stylistic temperaments from cool jazz to schizophrenic, the sonata is all about its last movement *In Memory of Joe Venuti* the first great American jazz violinist. I heard these two artists perform the sonata when it first came into their repertoire in 2007. It's a challenging work to make sense of, but twelve years or more in their blood have given American Double bragging rights; the interpretation heard last Saturday is certainly definitive in every detail.

The West Coast premiere of Bolcom's new *Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano* was the much anticipated, highlight of the evening and as Steven Gross intended, will certainly join Brahms' *Horn Trio, Op. 40* as a regular masterwork of the repertoire for this combination of instruments. Bolcom describes his new work as a musical reflection of the times in which we are living. "So many of us feel desperation from the constant endangering of our country and the world," Bolcom writes. "I wrote the *Trio* to express this, hoping listeners might possibly feel less alone." The first movement *Plodding, implacably controlled*, is a macabre march, conjuring fantastical images of Roman Legions and ancient empire with its various fanfare-like riffs. The second movement, *Headlong, brutal*, is a sea of busy transitions and a cornucopia of horn color which conjures a witches' brew of emotions sublime and damned. Fabulous playing from all three artists.

A solo horn opens the third movement, *As if far away, misterioso* which is vaguely reminiscent of the horn writing of Benjamin Britten, with magical sprinklings of chords in piano before the first violin entry. Later, another solo horn soliloquy is followed by a final section for all three instruments. The fourth movement *Very controlled and resolute*, begins with a marcato figure in fiddle and piano to lopsided, even grotesque horn passagework, the first scene devolving into chaos before another tableau, this time mawkish and comedic formulates from the remains, leading like a guiding light to a final bravura section for the ensemble. As might be imagined, considering they have just finished recording the work for release, the performance was categorical.

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews at Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

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