

NATIONAL BLACK ARTS FESTIVAL

Compositions show delights of diversity

By Derrick Henry
Classical music critic

There was plenty to stimulate the ear and engage the spirit at concerts of chamber music by contemporary black American composers Wednesday and Thursday — part of a three-concert series at Georgia State University which concludes tonight.

Contrasts abounded: Small against large, live versus electronic, old beside new.

The most striking contrasts came Wednesday. T.J. Anderson's "Bridging and Branching" pitted one of the smallest instruments, the flute, against one of the largest, the double bass. It made for fascinating antitheses — high versus low, light versus dark, delicacy versus force.

Next came another interesting juxtaposition, of music by the youngest composer on the series, David Soley (born in 1962), and the oldest, Hale Smith (b. 1925).

Mr. Soley was represented by "Linea," the only work to incorporate electronic sounds. Its electronic clangor effectively set off the rhapsodic viola part, robustly played by George Taylor.

On the other hand, Mr. Smith's "Introduction, Cadenzas, Interludes," pleased the ear with its mostly tonal, rather nostalgic idiom, skillfully scored for octet of piano, strings, harp and winds.

But the most arresting work in Wednesday's concert was the most ambitious, John E. Price's "On the Third Day," a musical telling of the Egyptian myth of Osiris. In his tremendously evocative and breathtakingly virtuosic score for double bass and piano, Mr. Price depicts the death of Osiris, his descent to the underworld and his resurrection on the third day.



John Price

MUSIC REVIEW

"Music Alive 1990"

Contemporary chamber music by black American composers. 8 tonight. GSU Recital Hall, Peachtree Center Avenue and Gilmer Street. Discussions with composers at 7:30 p.m. Free. 651-3676

Highly eclectic in style, this stunningly dramatic piece mixes a strong jazz and improvisatory flavor with remarkable control of tension and sonority. In this, its world premiere, it was brilliantly realized by the composer on piano and Jacqueline Pickett on double bass.

On Thursday, the standouts were the two biggest works: Adolphus Hailstork's three-movement "Trio" for violin, cello and piano, and Olly Wilson's "A City Called Heaven" (also in three movements), for flute, clarinet, percussion, piano, violin, viola and cello. Each lasted nearly 20 minutes.

Mr. Wilson's work powerfully transforms blues, boogie-woogie and the spiritual that provides its title into music that is bold in gesture, vividly orchestrated, suffused with rhythmic energy.

Mr. Hailstork's score, though the most traditional of the 10 heard at these concerts in terms of harmonic, melodic and structural language, was among the most communicative. It effortlessly traverses many moods, from the opening lament for Holocaust victims to the bracing scherzo and the exhilarating, gypsy-like finale.

Noteworthy, too, was Thursday's world premiere of "Through a Glass," an atmospheric setting of a Mari Evans poem by Atlanta-based composer Dwight Andrews. Scored for soprano voice (the mesmerizingly expressive Laura English Robinson), piano, percussion, cello and soprano saxophone, this colorful piece pulsed with life.

These concerts also included solidly crafted works by Noel Da Costa and Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson and a dazzling improvisation of Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo" by Leo Smith (trumpet), Leroy Jenkins (violin) and Mr. Andrews (bass clarinet).

The 26 performers coupled thoroughgoing professionalism with impressive musicality.