



IN CONCERT : Before and after space : ECM honors the late space composer Henry Brant, a local, renowned and Pulitzer Prize-winning musician

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ENSEMBLE FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall, UCSB

Cost: \$15 general, \$7 students

Information: 893-7001, www.music.ucsb.edu

Composer Henry Brant spent more than 25 years in Santa Barbara but made his mark around the world, evidenced by his Pulitzer Prize and legions of personal and critical admirers.

NEWS-PRESS FILE PHOTO

When the Ensemble for Creative Music gives its first official concert of the season Tuesday at UCSB's Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall, we can reasonably expect plenty of the virtues and challenges ECM has brought to the area for many years. As the hardest representative in the too-slim ranks of local organizations or projects dedicated to the care and feeding of contemporary music, ECM is a precious resource, and about the only place where we're not surprised to find a program of Igor Stravinsky and conceptualist Tom Johnson. ECM's own director Jeremy Haladyna also has a piece on the program.

This time around, however, the real main event on ECM's program arrives with a strong local and emotional imprint. Composer Henry Brant, who passed away this spring at age 94, has been Santa Barbara's most illustrious classical music resident for over 25 years. A well-known, if determinedly iconoclastic and individualistic composer for several decades, Brant spent more than 25 years living and working in his humble house on the Westside.

To honor the composer, ECM is presenting two Brant pieces, one old and one new-ish - from the extended golden years chapter of Brant's long and productive life. From earlier in his creative output, and bearing his typically witty titles from that era, come *Four Traumatics* and its celebrated *Smudged Lenses: Boogy-Woogy Fantasy on 'Dark Eyes'* movement.

Fast forwarding to a work from 1987, originally written for baritone Michael Ingham, the program features *An Era Any Time of Year*, an example of Brant's celebrated specialty, space music. For most of his life as a composer, Brant clung to the practice of writing music imagined with spatial considerations, with musicians placed around a venue rather than constrained to its stage. Frustrated by the age-old limitations of frontal stage-oriented schemes, Brant created music with regard to the live surround sound effect.

Much of Brant's commissions and performances took place in global locales beyond Santa Barbara, including the ambitious Ice Field project with the San Francisco Symphony in 2002. That earned Brant the coveted Pulitzer Prize.

But back in the 1980s, Brant was involved in several productions realized locally, including the "Millennium 2" (unveiled with multiple ensembles all over the UCen), music for Robert Potter's play "The Lady and the Labyrinth" and a memorable spatial spectacle called "Rainforest," at the Lobero Theatre. His popular flute piece "Angels and Devils" has also been performed at UCSB.

Brant's music is, by its nature and setup, avant-garde in its leaning, but the musical language itself is often quite accessible and tonal - though sometimes piled up into polytonality. As the composer once told me, "to me, concert music is not nearly complicated enough. And this I can't understand, because who leads a simple life these days, including the composer? I know what it's like - it's not at all simple. So in what way should simple music be appropriate for the times? That absolutely baffles me."

"I don't think it's the audience. I think it's the people who are selling music to the audience. Audiences I've never had any trouble with. They seem interested, they want to hear something. But if only simple, obvious stuff is put before them, there isn't any choice."

But he wasn't a fan or a practitioner of the serial, 12-tone scene. "There's nothing more obvious and crude and elemental than what's called serial music," he said. "Anybody can learn to write it in a half hour. It takes an expert to know the differences between composers, and yet that's considered to be an entire movement. That's always been beyond me."

For many years, the prospect of hearing Brant's unique music had the added challenge of scarce available recordings. Capturing Brant's site-specific space works in the compressed form of a stereo recording wasn't of much appeal to the composer. However, several volumes of Brant's music have been made available in recent years on the Innova label.

Born in 1913, in Montreal, and active in multiple circles throughout his life - teaching on the East Coast and composing while also doing some arranging in Hollywood (Alex North was one famed collaborator), Brant was truly an eyewitness and earwitness to much of the 20th century. Standing in his kitchen several years ago, he mused "in my lifetime, Bartok, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Milhaud, Ravel, Debussy, Prokofiev, Shostakovich were all writing music. None of them will ever write another note, but to us, they were the living present. We waited, with real anticipation, for their next piece that would come out. It was a big thing then. There weren't recordings of new music to the extent that there are now. So you went to hear it live if you possibly could, or got hold of the music and read it.

"You talk to people starting in now, and mention those people's names, and they say 'well, that's something from a book, isn't it?' It has changed."



Now, Brant is something from a book, but his music lives on and will hopefully gain a greater appreciation in time.

Back in 2002, on the April day he had won the Pulitzer, Brant could be found in his living room/work room, with the work table where he labored over his elaborate scores - standing up - and the piano his father bought him in 1929. He was, at the time, preparing for a piece called "Prophets," performed at the United Methodist Church in Santa Barbara. Other commissions loomed and, even at age 90, Brant seemed full of energy and intrigue in what was on the horizon. "Well, the unwritten pieces are always the best, or at least they seem so at the time," he laughed.

Commissions and attention came and went for many years. "All of a sudden," he said, "here they are and for quite a few years, there was nothing. That's the way it works. It's happened to me so many times. It has looked like there had been some progress and that things would be better and with more opportunities, and all of a sudden, I'm back to square one, and I stay there for five or 10 years. I guess that's not a unique story."

A reporter suggested that he wouldn't be at square one for a long while.

"Well," he revealed his signature impish grin, "that's the best news of today."