

## The Kenners

**Monday, February 13, 2006, 8:00 PM, and Tuesday February 14, 2006, 7:30 PM St. Botolph Hall, New England Conservatory, and Rutman's Violin Shop, Boston, MA**

Saxophonist Eliot Gattegno and pianist Eric Wubbels, graduate students at the New England Conservatory and Columbia University respectively, have decided to join forces in forming a duo called The Kenners. Judging from their maiden voyage on February 13, it's an undertaking filled with promise.

Much of their program proved engaging. For alto sax/piano pairing, William Albright's *Sonata* (1984) makes for staggeringly eclectic but utterly wonderful listening. It casts an imaginative eye on this four-movement format, never once seeming derivative; for example, the opening movement has two clear ideas but gets its sense of sonata-allegro form from creative fantasy, not a rigid cookbook. Its scalar approach ranges from an almost functional sounding and soulful slow movement to a grouchy and nervous scherzo without appearing inconsistent. A fine piece too rarely encountered.

Two solo selections heard here, *Boxing Music* (2004) by Todd Tarantino and *Sequenza VIIb* (1969/1991) by Luciano Berio, make the successful transition from oboe original to soprano sax transcription. The *Sequenza* is a ferociously fine masterwork, a grippingly memorable swirl around the standard tuning A. Virtuoso yet always idiomatic, it neatly folds multiphonics into more standard modes of performing. Tarantino's piece also traffics in such juxtapositions, while also tossing pitch bends and glissandi in for good measure. Inspired by music played to accompany Thai shadow pugilism (an activity more akin to choreography than brawling sport), it effectively makes staccato multiphonics sound like fisticuffs. And both compositions exhibit unusual yet sturdy architecture.

Lewis Spratlan's solo piano opus *Toccapsody* (1989) is every bit as odd as its title, initially seeming too bizarre to work but gaining in logic and enjoyment as it spins out. A sizable perpetual motion opening section ultimately proves to be the focus of a fantasy-filled and variation-like main body, the kinship between the two becoming more apparent as the rhapsodic entity moves along. And its scale-based yet non-triadic language convinces. *Avenue* (2000) by Sampo Haapamaki, scored for piano and alto saxophone, is less effective. Cast in a tonal idiom that floats between jazz and Impressionism, the piece unfortunately lacks contrast and formal conviction; figuration tends to be busy, often filigree oriented, regardless of mood -- which tends to impart little sense of either local shaping or larger clumping.

Performances were top-shelf from first to last. Gattegno's finger work was spot-on, his tone vibrant, his pacing sensitive, and his interpretations energetic. Wubbels proved a partner of equal worthiness, providing accompaniments that simultaneously sang and supported as well as solo work that combined technical accomplishment and insightful perceptiveness.

To paraphrase the end of the movie *Casablanca*, here's hoping this is the start of a beautiful musical friendship. All signs point that way.

--David Cleary, *New Music Connoisseur*