

The New York Times

December 20, 2009

The New Faces Among the Older Guard

By STEVE SMITH

I DO not consider myself prone to rash prognostications. But on a chance sighting in the Metropolitan Opera House lobby last month, I could not resist pulling out my cell phone for a quick Twitter post: "I've spotted Missy Mazzoli at the Met for 'House of the Dead.' One day I'll be here to hear her. Bank on it."

Hyperbolic, perhaps, yet that claim no longer feels so far-fetched. If a new generation of crafty, resourceful composers piloting their own destinies has been a prevailing theme in recent years, 2009 showed that some mainstream institutions are ready and willing to embrace them. The best-known example was Nico Muhly, drafted into the development program run by the Met and the Lincoln Center Theater even as he continued to play in nightclubs.

In October the Chicago Symphony Orchestra announced that Mason Bates and Anna Clyne, artists whose work involves sampling and electronica, would serve terms as composers in residence. In November the Detroit Symphony Orchestra gave a prestigious award and commission to Du Yun, a versatile New York composer and performer.

Like those peers Ms. Mazzoli, the executive director of the MATA Festival, has balanced well-honed do-it-yourself skills with her upward career trajectory. With Victoire, her electro-acoustic quintet, Ms. Mazzoli played successful club dates, made a splash at the Bang on a Can Marathon in June and released "A Door Into the Dark," a digital EP of four elegant, moody pieces, via the Web site eMusic.com.

Other artists were also eager to play Ms. Mazzoli's music. The Kronos Quartet introduced her evocative "Harp and Altar" during a Prospect Park concert in July and continues to play the piece on tour. "Still Life With Avalanche," composed for Eighth Blackbird and given its premiere in March, figures prominently in the group's 2010 repertory.

Larger works are on the way. The American Composers Orchestra is to play a new version of Ms. Mazzoli's "These Worlds in Us" at Zankel Hall in April. And the fledgling Orchestra of the League of Composers/I.S.C.M. has commissioned a piece from her.

Most impressive of all, meanwhile, was "Song From the Uproar," an ambitious multimedia song cycle that Ms. Mazzoli created with Stephen S. Taylor, a video artist. Based on the journals of Isabelle Eberhardt, a 19th-century Swiss explorer, the work was polished, haunting and powerfully moving in its premiere at the Galapagos Art Space in June.

When I heard part of the cycle played by different musicians at Galapagos last month, the work retained its full potency. And already the Bard College Conservatory of Music has commissioned a new orchestral version of "Song From the Uproar" for a fully staged production at Bard College on Feb. 26 and 28. **An ambitious opera company would do well to take note. The Met or otherwise, Ms. Mazzoli is going places fast. Bank on it.**