

## Spectrum Concerts Berlin Visits Carnegie Hall

By David Del Tredici

*Lucky Robert Helps...* to have so much of his music performed so elegantly and thoughtfully by the Spectrum Concerts Berlin at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Wednesday, December 7, 2011. Three major works were performed- *Serenade* (for five instruments), *Quartet* (strings and piano) and *In Retrospect* (piano solo), as well as Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (string sextet).

What a shame *The New York Times* chose not to review this concert because it was a stunning example of instrumental mastery, ensemble perfection and passionate commitment. In the New York City concert scene today, rarely have I heard such a high level of chamber music performance. It is a tribute to Frank Dodge, the American cellist who over 20 years ago founded this concert series in Berlin, honed it to perfection, and more recently exported it to various cities in the US.

Helps himself was a master pianist and his dazzling skill might have something to do with the musical neglect his compositions endured during his lifetime. As well, his music was unfashionably tonal in the aggressively atonal world of the 60's and 70's. But now, its freshness appears more and more clearly as that atonal world withers away. The works here span from 1960 to 1997, so the selection is comprehensive.

*Serenade*, the longest piece, joins three works written at different times. The complex and difficult, "Fantasy for Violin and Piano", is followed by a sensitive "Nocturne for String Quartet" and finally, "Postlude" introduces the horn together with the violin and piano. The works are dramatic and craggy and carry one of Help's signature gestures, the long, spun out tremolo into infinity.

*Quartet*, written just four years before his death, is one of Help's most masterful pieces. It begins surprisingly with a long, dreamy movement for piano solo, gradually joined by the other instruments. There is a fast movement that is charming, precise and full of impish life. At every turn Helps does the unexpected. In fact, the final movement subtitled, "The Players Gossip", comes as close to rollicking humor as he ever does. It was played superbly.

After intermission, pianist Naomi Niskala emerged to play *In Retrospect*, a series of five short piano pieces begun, as Helps says, "as a children's opus but quickly got out of hand." Helps' lifelong admiration of French music is perhaps clearest in these pieces that owe a debt as well to Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*. But of course being Helps, he always throws us a kinky curve or two. Niskala has the Helps style of playing down cold-brilliant, hard textures and finger work balanced by gorgeous differentiation of textures. She has recorded on two CD's the complete piano music of Robert Helps.

And then, the Spectrum people decided to show us what they can really do- what is in their blood (perhaps in the water?)- playing a transcendent interpretation of Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht*. I knew when the piece began, barely audible, that this would be a special performance. And then, as it rose to searing climax after climax, all at the same time, perfectly balanced – my expectations were gloriously confirmed.

*New York Times*, you missed something very special!

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