CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Searching For an Entrée On a Menu of 8 Composers

By PAUL GRIFFITHS



Photographs by Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

From left, Amy Iwazumi and Mischa Lakirovich, on the violin; Diliana Momtchilove, on the cello; and David Samuel, on the viola, playing "The Color of Blue" by Jacopo Baboni Schilingi at the Focus! festival.

Attending the Juilliard School's annual Focus! festival of 20th-century music is a bit like visiting a garden in early spring. There are a lot of eager buds ready to burst (plus some that are frost-nipped), but the shapes and colors of the summer can only be guessed at.

Student musicians are just starting to learn what it is to perform professionally. They are also just at the outset of engaging with new and unfamiliar music, often from another culture, of which the score alone can impart rather little.

This year that culture was Italy's, represented by 37 composers from Busoni to the 30-year-old Jacopo Baboni Schilingi, each of them heard just once. For an audience a concert of pieces by eight composers, many

Tidbits from largely unfamiliar Italians.

of them unknown in this country, is a set of experiences without a context: potentially exciting, but much more likely to induce puzzlement, dissatisfaction and facile judgments.

Of course, these concerts exist not so much for their audiences as for their performers, but for them, too, more coherence would be beneficial. Once again, Focus!, which ended last Friday, left one wishing it really did have a focus in the music of two or three composers who could help prepare students in a range of pieces and give more of them contact with a creative musician.

If the school were to try this, Mr. Baboni Schilingi might be a man to invite. His composition, "The Color of Blue," was a beautiful short piece for string quartet, evidently the work of a composer close to the Paris spectral school, but distinctively elegant and fascinating in its untanglings and retanglings of webs of sound. It had obviously appealed to the imaginations of its players: Amy Iwazumi and Mischa Lakirovich, violins, David Samuel, viola, and Diliana Momtchilove, cello.

There were several other fine performances. Miranda Cuckson had taken the trouble to learn Bruno Maderna's violin solo "Piece for Ivry" by heart, and played it as a single stroke of lyrical fantasy.

Eric Huebner made an excellent case for a gentler view than Maurizio Pollini's of Nono's "... Sofferte onde serene ..." for piano and electronic sounds: he must keep it in his repertory.

Another pianist, Susan Telner, showed Camillo Togni's "Three Capriccios" to be full of fire and warmth, glinting through rows of angularity. Togni, a contemporary of Nono's and a piano pupil of Michelangeli, would have been worth further exploring.

If more performers did not come across strongly, that was often because they were saddled with unrewarding pieces. Some of the foremost figures in Italian music of the last two decades — Franco Donatoni, Niccolò Castiglioni, Luca Lombardi, Marco Stroppa, Sonia Bo — were shown below their best, and other composers seemed to have little to offer.

There were, though, some discoveries. Ghedini's Four Duets on Sacred Texts, engagingly sung by Sarah Wolfson and Michael Slattery with Su-Yen Jeon at the piano, began with a quasi-medieval unaccompanied number most unusual for 1930. Fausto Romitelli's "Professor Bad Trip: Lesson III," for a mixed ensemble including electric guitars, was gloriously and precisely queasy. Fabio Nieder's arrangement of two Scarlatti sonatas, for an even stranger assortment of ancient and modern instruments, would have been delightful and teasing with a little more rehearsal.



Carmen Camerieri plays "Selim."

Unsurprisingly, two of the pieces that went best were those in which a jazz basis gave the players some security. Francesco Schlimé had a strong grasp of the rhythmic force and complexity in Luca Francesconi's "Mambo" for piano, and Carmen Camerieri — another who played from memory — gave the solo part of Ludovico Einaudi's trumpet concerto "Selim" an exquisitely careful and brilliant performance. (The title needs to be read in reverse, with "Davis" added.)

Mr. Camerieri's playing was the chief grace at the final orchestral concert, conducted by George Manahan. It included — astonishingly, a quarter-century after the composer's death — the first New York performance of Dallapiccola's "Three Questions With Two Answers," and brought back some musicians who had distinguished themselves earlier as soloists. They still seemed to be enjoying themselves.