

The NOW Orchestra

At the Glass Slipper on Friday, February 17

• BY ALEXANDER VARTY

Without having seen the rest of the New Orchestra Workshop Society's spring mini-festival, it's hard for me to say whether Friday's big-band blowout at the Glass Slipper was Hear It NOW's high point. But it was almost certainly the four-night event's loud point: the massed brass blare of the NOW Orchestra's horns, especially when augmented by René Lussier's electric guitar and Pierre Tanguay's drums, rivalled any hard-rock show for sheer sonic intensity. Anyone who might still think big-band jazz is a music of the past should audition this unit for a reality check.

In fact, both halves of this two-part concert attempted to project an image of what the big band might be like in the future, although featured composers Lussier and Paul Plimley

have very different visions of how it might sound.

The evening began with the 13-member NOW group (minus Québécois guests Lussier and Tanguay) playing two of Plimley's charts, "Dwelling in the House of the Spirits" and "The Joy of Chemistry". These works were, at times, astonishing, irritating, hilarious, and flawed. And I'm afraid the most powerful emotion they provoked in me was a sense of longing: specifically, longing for the octet that Plimley led in the mid-to-late 1980s. That group achieved an almost transcendental balance of weight and delicacy; in comparison, this larger unit was unnecessarily raucous and cluttered.

Still, Plimley is a masterful composer, and at times clouds of luminous beauty wafted from the ensemble. Although the pianist takes much of his inspiration from jazz visionaries Cecil Taylor and Duke Ellington, he was also profoundly inspired by the psychedelic movement, and one of the characteristics of his writing is its ability to wring mind-bending sonities out of acoustic instruments. Morphing is not an effect limited to the digital world.

Less pleasing were his attempts at bringing a theatrical edge to the proceedings. Plimley's solo and small-group performances are often as visually compelling as they are musically impressive, but in attempting to transfer his own eccentric style onto the orchestra—through contrapuntal laughter or the fragmented reading of philosophical texts—he runs the risk of coming off as both forced and pretentious. Better, I think, for him to serve as the sole shamanic figure subverting a more rigorously organized musical whole than to have a whole stageful of faux Tricksters clamouring—some more convincingly than others—for a share of the spotlight.

Clutter also dimmed the impact of some of Lussier's charts in the second half of the program, although in this case I think the miscues were the result of inadequate rehearsal time. With 10, rather than five, days of preparation, Lussier's loose suite, commissioned by NOW for the event, would have been magnificent.

As it was, it was still rather grand. Lussier grabbed our attention right off the bat with a Mancini-on-speed riff that set inhuman standards of pace and precision, relenting only long enough for Bruce Freedman to play a spiralling, lyrical solo on soprano saxophone. After that came a big, resonant blues—a close cousin of Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You", perhaps—that kept collapsing in on itself, some inspired collective improvisations, and a stately theme (worthy of Edward Elgar, I thought, although I don't know what Lussier would make of that) that eventually disembowelled itself on some thorny sonic prickles. Guitarists Lussier and Ron Samworth contributed the most abstract moments (although singer Kate Hammett-Vaughan was not far behind them in terms of extended technique); saxophonist Saul Berson and cellist Peggy Lee took the most beautiful solos.

As a composer, Lussier has a talent for subversion, which is a much more intimate act than mockery. Anyone can mock a musical form: that's just standing outside and throwing stones. Lussier manages to get *inside* whatever it is he wants to twist, be it blues, mariachi music, or some sort of film-soundtrack grandiosity, and from that vantage point he usually finds a way to show us its entrails.

Reading those entrails, we predict that, free from the excess adrenaline of the concert situation, the recording NOW intends to make of Lussier's pieces will be even more impressive than their onstage debut. ■