

## Peabody plays the ever-elusive Schnittke

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You have to love a composer who fulfills a commission for the Alban Berg centennial with a piece that mixes chunks of Shostakovich, Philip Glass, Stravinsky -- and even taps -- into one big mournful elegy.

That's what the late Alfred Schnittke did in his 1985 Piano Trio, and it was the high point of Thursday's recital by the Peabody Trio, presented by San Francisco Performances in Herbst Theatre.

Like nearly all of Schnittke's music, this 20-minute score offers an elusive blend of musical styles and emotional tones. The main theme, aptly described by one of the musicians as "Happy Birthday" played upside down and in a minor key, runs through the entire piece like a benevolent but lugubrious ghost, inciting the players to everything from still-voiced chorales to frenzied dissonant outbursts.

The attitude underlying Schnittke's stylistic restlessness is as hard as ever to pin down. Is it meant ironically? Is it a frantic search for new avenues of expression? And is the haunting beauty of the score's tonal episodes actually merited, or is it simply a tribute to the easy potency of cheap music?

The Peabody deftly evaded these tricky questions, producing a performance that was both fervent and dry-eyed, and left listeners to make up their own minds about Schnittke's intricate rhetoric. From the chugging Glass chords that pop up midway through the piece to the violin's final fade into the ether, the performance found its way with surefooted precision.

Though it's been in residence at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory since 1989, the ensemble has roots in the Bay Area -- the husband-and-wife team of pianist Seth Knopp and violinist Violaine Melançon were students at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in the 1980s and performed here frequently. Cellist Natasha Brofsky contributes a passionate intensity to the mix.

A crisp, delightfully fleet-footed rendition of Mozart's B-Flat Trio, K. 502, opened the

program. There was more memorializing during the second half, with Tchaikovsky's enormous and strange Piano Trio in A Minor, written in 1881- 82 to commemorate the death of pianist Nikolai Rubinstein.

The music's expansive frame and torrentially expressive material, an unbridled outpouring of grief, came through eloquently in the ensemble's performance. On the other hand, a lot of the virtuoso piano writing meant to evoke Rubinstein's brilliance as a performer was simply approximated.

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