

Trio Basso an unlikely union

Around 10 p.m. last night, laughter broke out in the Premiere Dance Theatre under the unlikely auspices of New Music Concerts.

I say unlikely because for the last several years this worthy organization has worked assiduously to encourage those skeptical inhabitants of the modern age, the citizens of Toronto, to take seriously the sounds of our time.

Unfortunately for this goal, the sounds of Hans Joachim Hespos' *Prestunissimo* (1981) simply were not designed to be taken seriously, or at any rate with a face uncracked by a smile.

For in the course of this 12-minute opus, the self-taught German composer turned the Trio Basso at various times into frozen tableaux of exaggerated playing gestures, a team of loquacious individualists, holding their instruments aloft and babbling into their f-holes, and berserk virtuosi, bowing away like three sprinters, bounding for the finish line.

The Trio Basso, I should explain, brings together the unlikely combination of viola (Eckart Schloifer), cello (Othello Liesmann) and double bass (Wolfgang Guttler), and has done so ever since 1982, when these three geographically separated German musicians teamed up to make their debut at the Witter Days for New Chamber Music.

Theatrical skill

Like several of the other composers who have risen to the challenge of their unusual musical marriage, Hespos has found amusement as well as inspiration in the notion of a violin-less string ensemble.

His seven short movements are really mini-scenes, as much dramatized and acted out as actually played, and it is a tribute to the dead-pan theatrical skill of the Trio Basso that *Prestunissimo* worked as well as it did.

Not surprisingly, the anointed messiah of New Musictheatre, the Argentine-born Mauricio Kagel, has also risen to the challenge of giving the Trio Basso something to do: *Aus dem Nachlass* (From The Bequest, 1981-83), an arrangement of pages from a musical epic titled *Der mundliche Verrat* (The Verbal Betrayal), recognized better than any other work on last night's program the nature of musical life below the treble clef.

The *mysterioso* quality of the low string voices emerged in a variety of pedal points, pluckings and sombre flowing melodies, but not without the introduction of more jocular elements, including, latterly, some satirical com-



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clous rhythmic playing by the three protagonists. But another of the works specially written for the threesome, Georg Kroell's *Capriccio sopra mi* (Caprice on E, 1982) caught the ear's attention by weaving an almost traditional melody based on E through so much newer-sounding material.

In some ways, however, the evening's most attractive scores came not from Germany but from Canada, and I'm thinking particularly of *Barbaresco* (1984), by the Toronto-born McGill University professor, Bruce Mather, a beautifully integrated string trio, whose use of quarter tones fosters a smooth flow from one instrumental voice to the next.

Although Mather deliberately silhouettes one solo voice at a time against an accompaniment fash-

ioned by the other two, there is a sense of intimate interplay holding everything together from first note to last.

Incidentally, *Barbaresco* recently won the Composers, Authors and Publishers Association of Canada's (CAPAC) \$3,000 Micheline Coulombe Saint-Marcoux Award in honor of the International Year of Canadian Music.

Hardly surprising

Its companion-mate on the program, University of Toronto professor Lothar Klein's *Virtuoso Music*, was written by a skilled manipulator of large instrumental forces; so it was hardly surprising to find its composer augmenting the Trio Basso by seven additional players for what turned out to be the premiere of an extended five-movement essay in instrumental virtuosity.

With Klein himself conducting, *Virtuoso Music* dared to be — like the Trio Basso itself — experimental and entertaining at the same time.