

Composer-wit feeds on the culinary arts

Academic wit, so often regarded as the birch blight of the groves of academe, has been known to yield a chuckle or two down through the centuries, and it seems that we have in Toronto one of its more benign musical practitioners in Lothar Klein.

Professor Klein earns his daily bread as a teacher of composition and chairman of the University of Toronto's Graduate Department of Music. He moonlights over the treble and bass clefs as well and it is as a composer that most of us know him.

It is as a composer-wit that he presented himself in the MacMillan Theatre last night via the premiere performance of *The Philosopher in the Kitchen*, and if this recent (1974) opus strikes you as improbably titled, you probably haven't read *The Physiology of Taste*.

This philosophic treatise on the culinary arts has obviously inspired Lothar Klein to make merry with the cosmic idea *Tiny Tim* so succinctly memorialized in the aphorism, *You are what you eat*.

Not for Klein the simplistic approach of a tip-toe through tulips, however. His new piece has five sections (or courses), lasts nearly 20 minutes and involves a full symphony orchestra and contralto soloist.

The contralto in last night's performance, the increasingly svelte Maureen Forrester, was given such tasks as singing an old recipe for fondue against a parodied 18th century Provençal air and lamenting, "first parents of the human race, you lost all for an apple . . . What would you have done for a truffled turkey?"

Fathers of science

It's questions like that that used to keep theologians up nights. Klein proffers others as well, while offering the observation that the necessity of preparing food taught man to use fire, with which he subsequently subdued nature. The real fathers of science, in other words, are our chefs.

Along with these words of culinary-inspired wisdom, culled from the spirit of Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (Napoleonic author of *The Physiology of Taste*), the good professor does, of course, supply some notes, and it is in the juxtaposition of music and words that his own wit finds room to play.



Music

William Littler

The Philosopher in the Kitchen is full of stylistic parodies, with the orchestra called upon to emulate everything from a Mahlerian proclamation of portent to a farandole of Bizet-like jollity.

And of course that remarkable Forrester voice is exploited to the full, throughout its range and for almost all its colors. The lady's comedic success was restricted only by Klein's tendency to over-orchestrate in support of the sung words (she spoke as well as sang), thus rendering many of them unintelligible.

Musical gamesmanship

Indeed, *The Philosopher in the Kitchen* should probably be listened to with score and words in hand. It is a piece of intellectual gamesmanship in music and only its broader outlines appeared to emerge clearly last night.

Boris Brott, who conducted the CBC Festival Orchestra on this occasion, flanked the Klein opus with the North American premiere of Svend Nielsen's *Nuages (Clouds)* of 1972 and the zillionth performance of Ravel's *Bolero*.

Nuages does more than borrow the name of one of Debussy's popular scores; it carries on the same tradition of impressionistic orchestral portraiture. The Danish composer's palette draws heavily on string colors, with plenty of sustained notes and harmonies and predominantly high pitches.

Several kinds of clouds are portrayed, from the ominous rain clouds to the wispy cirrus. Although the tone-painting isn't literal, the piece does sound moodily evocative.

As for *Bolero*, it was a mistake. Though the CBC Festival Orchestra contains mostly Toronto Symphony players, it didn't respond with the kind of ensemble necessary to bring off Ravel's study in color and crescendo. Some of the solos were played loudly, some softly, the woodwinds sounded like strangers to each other and the all-important snare drum foundation wasn't even rhythmically secure. In the words of Charlie Brown, Arrgh!