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VILLAGE VOICE
Nov 26 - Dec. 3, 1980



SYLVIA PLACHY

Carles Santos succeeds only because he tries so hard to be liked.

Two... Pans

By Gregory Sandow

I never hold back my enthusiasm when I write good reviews, but when I write bad ones I often restrain my . . . less positive feelings.

Take the review I'm about to write of Carles Santos, who performed his music for solo voice and solo piano at the kitchen on November 3. I thought that he was all charisma and no substance, that his performance succeeded only because he's so likeable, or because he tries so hard to be liked. I didn't hear anything of musical interest in his work . . . no, better change that: I didn't hear *much* of musical interest in his work. Let's be fair (which requires me also to say that most people in the audience seemed to love the concert).

Santos writes music built from repeated phrases that add something new at each repetition, a reasonable way of working but not one likely to hold my interest through a whole evening of short pieces. Each work took off in much the same way as the one before; the additive gambit came to seem predictable, stale, and finally . . . well, I'll be mild and say it seemed frustrating, more like a nervous tic than a mode of composition. At least in the vocal pieces, built from unpitched sounds, the additions came unpredictably, in mid-phrase. But the new material in the simple, diatonic piano pieces was added, conventionally enough, at the phrase endings. Musical notes are hard to push around because they have intrinsic relations among themselves, and I began to wonder whether Santos had the compositional technique to use them as imaginatively as he uses noises.

Actually, the additive technique in the piano pieces didn't seem to strengthen the music in any way; the phrases got longer but not more interesting or more intense. The additions sounded like excuses for playing the same sentimental romantic piano licks over and over again. And the vocal pieces were sentimental, too, in their way. Yes, the sighs, lip smackings, and delighted tiny gasps suggested bliss, sorrow, sex, irresistibly furry little animals, and anything else you might want to find amusing, but they also seemed too calculated, too self-satisfied, and too limited in emotional range for me to take their supposed spontaneity very seriously. They didn't have the unpretentious exuberance of Kirk Nurock's natural sounds. And they certainly didn't have the amazed self-discovery I've heard in some of Joan LaBarbara's vocal work; *that* only comes to artists who are willing to surprise themselves.

If my criticisms don't sound so restrained, consider that I might have admitted that I wanted to . . . but no, consider instead George Bernard Shaw's famous review of *Job*, a work by a leading academic composer of the 1890s, Hubert Parry. Shaw began by pretending that he'd been trying to avoid the piece and

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