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Yannatos' work distinguished by quiet virtues

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For 25 years, composer James Yannatos has been teaching music, coaching music and making music

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at Harvard, most notably, as the tireless conductor of the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra since 1964. But he has been no ivy tower recluse. Yannatos has been the best of musical citizens, taking his orchestra on tours through Europe and Asia with programs heavy on the local and contemporary and, along with composer Charles Fussell, directing the New England Composers Orchestra, dedicated to the very pragmatic and important work of giving young composers a chance to hear professional readings of their new orchestral scores. But during these years Yannatos has also been composing music, lots of it. So it was a fitting that for its tribute to Yannatos the Harvard

MUSIC OF JAMES YANNATOS: 25 YEARS AT HARVARD, a concert at the Loeb Drama Center, Harvard University, on Monday night.

Department of Music sponsored a concert of his works and a first-rate roster of performers turned out to play them, members of Collage, the New World String Quartet among them. The music performed spanned 30 years and included a premiere, 3 Bagatelles for Violin and Cello, written for Sophie Wilker and Martha Babcock.

If Yannatos's works don't grab you by the collar and shout their importance at you, that's no matter, for this music is distinguished by quieter workaday virtues: clarity of writing, sonorous scoring, expressive directness and straightforward lyricism. And if I found myself wincing at the treacy original poems that Yannatos set in his early 3

Songs I also admired his courage in letting us hear them, for the music is rewarding — post-Bergian atonal ruminations with some traces of American punk — and Lorraine Hunt's performance was winning.

The heartiness of Yannatos' personally seemed most present in his sets of short lyrical utterances, especially, the Suite for Six (1969), six mini-movements of airy attractiveness, some fun-and-games tricks (rhythmic foot shuffling) and a genial ambling forward motion, which suggests the composer himself walking with energetic but calm purposefulness through Harvard Yard. In the longer works, like the neo-baroque Concerto for Contrabass and Chamber Orchestra (1987), the composer's handling of extended forms is less convincing. Things gets repetitive and a feeling of forced good cheer sets in.

The concert concluded with a performance of an abstract, striking and unpretentious dance work

choreographed by the composer's daughter, Kalya Yannatos, who performed it with the superb hornist and — on this occasion — dancer Eric Ruske. Scored entirely for solo horn, the music was performed from memory by Ruske as he — with simple, nimble gestures — entwined himself with the more acrobatic movements of the lovely Kalya Yannatos. Ruske — if only he had a heldentenor voice — would be a dream-come-true Siegfried: he looks the part and could move, act and play his own horn solos.

During intermission, three groups drawn from Harvard's many choral ensembles, positioned about the lobby, sang some of Yannatos' whimsical "Silly and Serious Songs," all set to nonsense lines of children ("Maureen is a pain/She danced in the rain"). And the music did just what it is supposed to do: give "the sillies" to those singing it and hearing it.