

Cascadia Composers welcome springtime with new works

by James Bash on March 21, 2011



The [Cascadia Composers](#) concert on Saturday evening (March 19) contained a lot of thoughtful pieces, but too many of them were mild. If only a couple works would have had an upbeat tempo or some spice, then the event would have been more engaging for the audience at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall. This concert was the third and final one in a festival that began the day before. Cascadia Composers, an organization

consisting of composers who live in the Northwest, sponsored a series of lectures and concerts, and must be commended for assembling a variety of musical works, musicians, and composers from all over the nation.

Saturday evening's concert began with "Gravitations," which was written by Michael Johanson who teaches at Lewis & Clark College and serves as the artistic director of the Friends of Rain new music ensemble. Played by clarinetist Barbara Heilmair, this piece gave the sense of moving in various directions from a main area of sound. Heilmair did a fine job of exploring all sorts of tones – from short and percussive to elongated and plaintive – that gave the piece an abstract but pleasant quality.

Next came Jack Gabel's "Elegy (On a Theme by Jean Sibelius)," which was played by cellist Diane Chaplin. As a preface to her performance, Chaplin noted that she would be using a timer application on her Android phone, because of the exact timings that Gabel had indicated in the score; so this might have been the first public performance of a piece with this kind of phone app. Gabel's music did contain muffled snippets from Sibelius's Second Symphony, but it charged into other sonic dimensions that contrasted smooth legato tones with buzzing agitated ones.

Violinist Michael Hsu and pianist Maria Choban conveyed nervous energy and random-like quality of Art Resnick's "Juxtapositions." This piece had brief sections in which Choban stood up and reached over the music rack to tap the strings with mallets or strum them with her fingers. Sometimes she tapped the piano's side and Hsu tapped his violin. A Haydnesque, elongated pause near the end of the piece caused the audience to start applauding, but that was followed with a smile and a brief passage before the piece really concluded.

Self-deprecating humor was the big theme of Dan Senn's "Wisconsin Air," a video piece with pre-recorded sound. Senn's soundscape enhanced a memoir-like story in which he visited his parent's home in rural or suburban Wisconsin. The video concentrated on the bathtub and sink that had been abandoned to the elements in the backyard of his boyhood. It was a wistful tale, and the music gently supported the story.

After intermission, clarinetist Barbara Heilmair, violinist Lucia Conrad, cellist Diane Chaplin and pianist Ben Corbin performed David Drexler's "Devil's Lake." Inspired by a picturesque lake near Baraboo, Wisconsin, this piece had an evocative section in which the sound became very pointillistic and an extended section in which nervous sounds from the cello, violin, and piano contrasted well against the sustained line of the clarinet. Curiously, the piece ended in a ragged way, which suggested a miscommunication by the ensemble – or maybe that was intended.

Tomas Svoboda's "Folk Dance" received a delightful performance from clarinetist Heilmair. The piece evoked rustic Bohemian dance tunes with liveliness and charm. The last part of the piece had a jumpy quality that moved all over the place and made some of the audience members move rhythmically in their seats.

The concert ended with the world premiere of David S. Bernstein's "Petite Suite Chromatique." Cellist Diane Chaplin and pianist Susan DeWitt Smith created a variety of moods that ranged from mysterious and languid to turbulent and splashy, enjoying their excursion into the musical landscape that Bernstein created.



James Bash writes articles for a variety of publications, including magazines such as Opera America, Open Spaces, Opera, MUSO, International Arts Manager, American Record Guide, Symphony, Opera Canada, and PSU Magazine. The newspapers include Crosscut, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, The Oregonian, The Columbian, The Portland Tribune, The Register-Guard, and Willamette Week. James has also written a number of articles for the Oregon Arts Commission and contributed articles to the 2nd edition of the Grove Dictionary of American Music. James was a fellow to the 2008 NEA Journalism Institute for Classical Music and Opera. He is a member of the Music Critics Association of North America (mcana.org) and lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife, Kathy.