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OREGON ARTS AND CULTURE

## Northwest New Music: rising tide of contemporary sounds

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Northwest New Music performs at Portland State University

Sometime during the second movement Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, performed Tuesday night at Portland State University's cozy Lincoln Recital Hall by a splendid team of Oregon classical musicians, I began to realize that I was in the middle of something special.

It wasn't just the spine-tingling performance of Messiaen's 20th century masterpiece, plus other works by Debussy and the great 20th century Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu. I also realized that this was fourth concert in as many weeks starring local musicians performing relatively contemporary music. Those other concerts also featured mostly original music written in the 21st century by Oregonians, so with the most recent work being Takemitsu's 1981 "Toward the Sea," Tuesday night's [Northwest New Music](#) concert — which in most other cities would be one of the few "modern" music concerts of the season — almost counted as classical fare here in Portland.

And all of this has been happening before the classical music "season," whatever that means anymore, has really even started! This coming weekend (see below) offers still more new music treats, as does almost every weekend for the rest of the year. NWNM and other new music groups are [springing up](#) (and cooperating — the pianist Tuesday was the superb Susan Smith of Third Angle New Music Ensemble, and she and the new 3A violist are performing this weekend with still another group), while the city's [other alt.classical groups](#) going strong and even pushing into the mainstream; two of them, Electric Opera Company and Opera Theater Oregon, even participated in old-line Portland Opera's street party last weekend.

In October alone, veteran new music ensembles Third Angle and FearNoMusic are staging important contemporary music concerts, the art gallery Disjecta is hosting a week-long exploration of Northwest electronic music by women, while old-line classical presenting organizations are bringing contemporary programs to Portland: Friends of Chamber Music's Ebene Quartet and So Percussion shows; Portland Piano International's recital — at Doug Fir Lounge, a rock club! — by the jazz/classical pianist Uri Caine last week; and a mostly 20th century program by Inon Bartanan next. And dance companies like Oregon Ballet Theater and Polaris Dance are bringing live 20th century or even contemporary music into their shows.

New music also abounds in October choral concerts at Portland State University and Lewis & Clark College. Two more of our alt.classical groups, Vagabond Opera and March Fourth Marching Band, are in the midst of major national tours behind new albums, another (Portland Cello Project) is recording its next album and prepping for a big winter tour, and national media are about take notice (more on that soon). It's starting to look suspiciously like Portland is entering a golden age for contemporary music performance.

### **New Musics Series at TBA**

**September is notoriously a slow month** for non-pop music of any kind, but a Time-Based Arts Festival concert on the 14th showcased the welcome occasional series New Musics, which started last year at Holocene. Curator Claudia Meza (who fronts one of Portland's most acclaimed indie bands, Explode into Colors) chose a strong lineup of experimental works, including her own "instrumental opera" Mourning Youth, with video by Chris Hackett (featuring a girl applying lipstick to her face and slow motion skateboarders), sound art by Thomas Thorson, choreography by Allie Hankins, vocals by Portland's Flash Choir and percussion by Portland Taiko. Because it was announced as a work in progress, I'll save further description for future performances, but already this multimedia presentation shows plenty of promise.

Preceding Meza's work was a characteristically haunting tape collage piece, PART, by one of Portland's most interesting musicians, Liz Harris, who records as [Grouper](#). Augmented by Harris's live sound processing and vocals by the Flash Choir, it, too, felt unfinished yet provided some evocative moments. It's good to see TBA providing showcases for locals as well visiting artists.

The show opened with another multimedia presentation featuring San Francisco's Tashi Wada's long tone drones, played on two reed organs, perfectly matching slowly evolving color projections by Madison Brookshire. Reminiscent of La Monte Young's early minimalist experiments half a century ago, it would probably work better in an installation setting rather than on a stage where you sit and gaze and listen for half an hour. Plenty of audience members felt free to come and go during the half hour experience.

### **Cascadia Composers**

**Three days later, challenging the unofficial TBA embargo**, the remarkably active Cascadia Composers group, now entering its fourth year, presented an afternoon show at Sherman Clay Pianos, with especially attractive works by Paul Safar, Jeff Winslow and others, and starring fine musicians like pianist Maria Choban and NWNM cellist Diane Chaplin. CC is providing a nice opportunity for regional composers to showcase their work. It varies in quality, and is often fairly conservative, but I've never been to a CC concert that wasn't worth the admission price.

Last Friday, CC was back with a bigger concert at PSU's Lincoln Recital Hall, featuring new music by women composers. Jan Mittelstaedt's breezy *Crosscurrents* for string quartet (played by an all distaff foursome) kicked the show off on a buoyant note. Accompanied by pianist Lisa Marsh, Carole Crowder Phillips sang her own *Unconfined* with conviction. The music suited the text, by women poets, well. PSU student Amelia Bierly performed on cello with violin and horn accompaniment in a movement of her promising trio in progress, *In the Shadow of the Elm*. Elizabeth Blachly-Dyson's tuneful string trio *Glimpses* and Lisa Marsh's joyful, jazzy *Pour le Trio* (for flute, bass and Marsh's piano) maintained the first half's unremittingly pleasant feel, but the first half's end, I was ready for more ambitious — and maybe ambiguous — fare.

It happily arrived after intermission. Susan Alexjander's intriguing video installation *Zero Waiting* paired her electronic score with nature sounds and video imagery (created by California artist Diana Hobson) ranging from microscopic (protozoa) to macrocosmic (galaxies) and levels in between. Again, it would have worked better in an installation setting, but was concise and visually compelling enough to hold the stage.

Cynthia Stillman Gerdes's *Crazy Jane* provided a tart antidote to the relentless likability of the first half selections. Not that her unpredictable, occasionally dissonant rhapsodic piece was unlikable, and it profited from the most commanding performance of the evening, by veteran Portland pianist (and PPI director) Harold Gray and Oregon Symphony violinist Erin Furbee. The show closed on a high note with PSU music prof Bonnie Miksch's dazzling *Divinity roused* for a mixed sextet. The initial easygoing melodies soon gave way to eccentric rhythms and glittering sound textures. It's one of the coolest new works by an Oregon composer I've heard this year, and I hope we get to hear another performance before long. Whether she's working with acoustic or electronic instruments, Miksch is proving to be one of Oregon's most vital musical voices. More concerts of women's music are coming next month.

## Tumult of Rainbows

**Then came Tuesday's revelatory NWNM concert** — also at Lincoln Recital Hall, and PSU composition chair Bryan Johanson deserves kudos for making that lovely remodeled space available for so much contemporary music — that really made me wonder whether Oregon may be approaching a contemporary music renaissance.

The original Renaissance looked back to earlier eras for inspiration, and you can't find better models than the 20th century impressionists from Debussy to Takemitsu. The latter's delicate *Rain Tree* opened the show with two percussionists striding down the aisles from behind the audience, playing little crotales (ringing metal disks) that the composer used to suggest raindrops caught by a tree and gradually released, which the piece, which also used vibraphone and marimbas, beautifully evokes. So effectively was the atmosphere created (thanks in part to appropriately soft lighting) that I wished that Debussy's solo flute showcase, *Syrinx*, had immediately followed, before the polite greeting from NWNM co-founder Florian Konzetti. (Last summer, the flutist at one of Chamber Music Northwest's Protege concerts played it in darkness, to powerful effect, which might have worked well here after the lights went down on *Rain Tree*.) Sarah Tiedemann's performance was no less able, as it was in Takemitsu's lovely *Toward the Sea* for flute and Konzetti's sensitive marimba.

The moodily beautiful first half whetted my appetite for Messiaen's epic 1941 quartet, famously composed in a World War II POW camp. It, too, is a moody piece; I once heard it performed at a California music festival, at 11 pm, in a candlelit art gallery, with listeners reclining on cushions. But the moods swing wildly.

*“Crystal liturgie: the awakening of birds... surrounded by a shimmer of sound. Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of time: ... gentle cascades of blue orange chords, garlanding, with their distant carillon the quasi plainsong chanting of the violin and cello. Abyss of the birds: The abyss is Time, with its sorrows and its weariness. Danse of fury: Music of stone, fearful granite sonorities; the irresistible movement of steel, enormous blocks of purple fury, of icy intoxication. Tumult of Rainbows: In my dreams I hear recognized chords and melodies, I see known colours and forms.... I pass beyond reality and submit in ecstasy to the dizziness, a gyratory interlocking of superhuman sounds and colours. These swords of fire, these flows of blue orange lava, these sudden stars; this is the tumult of rainbows.”*

Those are excerpts from the mystical composer's own preface to the score, helpfully included in the extensive program notes by NWNM. The music is even more colorful.

NWNM's lineup comprised some of Oregon's most prominent classical players. Susan Smith has provided powerful piano for years in Third Angle concerts. Fritz Gearhart has especially sparkled in American music since he arrived on the University of Oregon faculty in 1998 — it's a real treat to have a violinist of his stature playing in Portland, too. David Hattner not only conducts the Portland Youth Philharmonic and is one of three finalists for the same position in Eugene's Oregon Mozart Players, but has also contributed clarinet to new music concerts in Portland. And Chaplin, a former member of New York's renowned Colorado Quartet who now works for Portland's Metropolitan Youth Symphony and conducts the Oregon Pro Arte Youth Chamber Orchestra, seems to be everywhere since moving to Oregon a couple of years ago. NWNM deserves credit for bringing such distinguished players together.

What distinguishes all of them is a shared go-for-it aesthetic that has animated their other ensembles and is necessary in music like Messiaen's, so replete with the composer's ecstatic visions, yet so oddball in its construction. I've heard other, relatively inert performances that seemed more concerned with getting the admittedly tricky rhythms and phrases right (the composer was allergic to bar lines here) than in communicating its passion to the listeners. That wasn't a problem here. Even though this was the first time this particular group had played together, and they were clearly still tidying up a few matters (some revealed in the composer's cruel unison sections, where everyone's playing the same tricky passages, so any deviation becomes apparent), none of that mattered in a performance as edgy and deeply committed as this one. In this gripping concert, Northwest New Music set a commendably high standard for chamber music in this new season. They'll play the program again on Tuesday, October 11 at Willamette University's Hudson Concert Hall in Salem.

## Looking Ahead

**More chamber music is on the way, starting this weekend.** On Friday, the **Arnica Quartet**, founded a few years back by Oregon Symphony and Third Angle violist Charles Noble, takes a higher profile in a concert at Portland's Community Music Center. It's the first in a series called *Parallels*, which pairs music by two related composers. In this case, commendably, one of them is a living, breathing, writing composer, Daniel Ott; the other is 20th century master Benjamin Britten. The concert will feature quartets and other chamber music by both.

Monday and Tuesday brings one of the hottest classical music ensembles on the planet back to Portland for a **Friends of Chamber Music** concert. France's Ebene Quartet will play that most beautiful of all quartets, by Maurice Ravel, and its close runner up, by Debussy. This is music that won them major awards, and they'll also play jazz and rock covers that won them popular appeal beyond the classical world and NPR play on that Monday concert. Tuesday's show is strictly classical: Mozart, Brahms, Borodin. Both are urgently recommended.

**Portland Taiko** is performing some of its greatest hits (original dance and percussion music) at Portland Center for the Performing Arts this weekend. And the **Oregon Symphony** plays music from the great American opera, George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (consolation for those who missed Seattle Opera's staging last month), plus other American music treats and more. Friday also brings one of the last chances to hear **poet Robert Briggs's musical exegesis** of the Beat generation, accompanied by a crack jazz trio in appropriate cool style, at Portland's TaborSpace. Portland's **Miracle Theater** continues its exploration of new Latin music, dance and theater this weekend, and Friday you can hear top Oregon musicians play Latin sounds and music by Oregon's own Mason Williams in a new group called **Los Gringos Latinos**, at Silvan Ridge Winery. Next Wednesday at Portland's Alberta Rose Theater, you can get a foretaste of one of the most anticipated classical events of the season when **pianist Maria Choban and tenor Ken Beare** offer excerpts of their new take on Schubert's great *Winterreise* song cycle, with Classical Revolution PDX, in a concert that also includes the fascinating Brooklyn-based classical-cum-pop singer/composer Gabriel Kahane and Portland's Holcombe Waller. The pair will perform the full cycle in November, and we'll be telling you more about it then.

There's plenty more classical, postclassical and other new music on tap in Oregon this weekend, and you can always check some of the links to the right of this page, like [this one](#), for more info. You'll need to, if you want to keep up with the flood tide of new music that seems to be rising in Oregon along with our rivers these days.