

Oboe Highlighted In Earplay Program / Ellen Harrison's piece stands out

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The colors that came to mind during Monday evening's Earplay concert at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum were blue and gold.

Four of the five composers highlighted on the second program of this new music organization's season have pursued their education at the University of California. Yet none of the pieces emerged bearing the stigma of "student effort."

The best of them disdained orthodoxy and followed their own preoccupations. The most memorable of these chamber works revealed in the sheer expressive power of individual instruments.

Among the three West Coast premieres, Ellen Harrison's "Masques et Visages" (Masks and Faces) (1998-99) stood out for its sophisticated ensemble writing and its stunning deployment of the oboe in a wide range of moods.

In the first section, "Masks of Regret," the solo instrument launches an elegiac song that eventually collides and triumphs over the pizzicato onslaughts of a string trio. In the second movement, "The Furies Unleashed," the oboist assumes a more animated, even playful character, an isolated figure in a haunted ballroom.

Harrison, who teaches in Ohio, wastes barely a note in her 16-minute opus, and though one might have wished for a more blandishing acoustic than the forum offers, the playing was intensely wrought. The musicians included oboist Andrea Plesnarski, violinist Lisa Weiss, violist Ellen Ruth Rose and cellist Thalia Moore.

Earlier, in her "FLUTE 3.2.4" (1994), Adriana Verdie de Vas Romero recalled Varese's "Density 21.5" in its vivid exploration of this instrument's capabilities, restricting each of the movements to certain intervals and attempting two-voice polyphony. Tod Brody was the sprightly, pensive and ultimately virtuosic protagonist in this monodrama.

Eitan Steinberg, an Israeli composer who has studied at Berkeley, opened the concert with the brief, "Talk, Talk, Talk" (1997; West Coast premiere), in which vigorous exchanges among the members of the string trio leave an effect, not of contention but of shared tragedy. The players adroitly gauged the work's wide dynamic range.

The two-movement "Trio Rustico" was commissioned by Earplay from the late Walter Winslow in 1989, and 12 years have not dimmed its highly original impression of the Roman landscape. The scoring for flute, cello and clarinet (Peter Josheff) places the cello in a contrasting role.

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"Airs and Zephyrs" is every bit as evocative as it sounds, while "Tunes and Excursions," arranged as a theme and variations, proposes a lively conversation before its reflective ending.

Mary Chun concluded the program by leading all six players in the West Coast premiere of Daniel S. Godfrey's "Numina" (1991).

The composer emphasizes unconventional bowing among the strings and odd methods of sound production among the winds. The results are jocular in a dry, almost Gallic manner, and the performance afforded much pleasure.

If, however, the forum is to continue as Earplay's home, the group should consider an acoustical shell.

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