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By Jules Langert

Earplay's diverse, imaginative concert of last Monday at the Forum at Yerba Buena Center elicited top-notch performances from this group's talented band of resident players: pianist Karen Rosenak, flutist Tod Brody, clarinetist Peter Josheff, violinist Carla Kihlstedt, violist Ellen Ruth Rose, cellist Thalia Moore, and percussionist Tim Dent. In four demanding chamber pieces, they displayed an unflaggingly high level of professionalism, awareness, and commitment.

John Thow's *Chumash Songs* (2000), based on the music of Native American tribes from coastal southern California, began the program. The melodic material, drawn from old recordings and transcribed and reworked by the composer, was fairly simple, but Thow's settings and arrangements were original and full of interest.

The first movement, "Lullabys [sic] and Laments," adds heterophonic echoes in various instruments to the gently rising lyrical figure that is the main idea, with bell-

like touches of color and resonance from the tuned percussion. Later, urgent ostinatos accompany a strongly accented clarinet melody. In the faster-paced second movement, "Tomol Journeys," descending melodies in close imitation suggest the motion of canoes on a swift, seaborne current. Once again, Thow's use of percussion was apt and enlivening.

Anguished Tenderness

Veil, by Greg D'Alessio (2001), which received its first performance here, was an elegiac, commemorative piece for muted strings and flute, in several linked sections. From the fragmentary, gradually coalescing opening, through subsequent solos for each of the instruments, to the poised, homophonic final episode, this was a beautiful and expressive work, suffused with an anguished tenderness.

Steven Hartke's piano quartet *King of the Sun* (1988), which ended the first half, may have been the most difficult piece on the program. Each of its several movements explored ingeniously different textural premises, though most of the musical interest remained in the three strings, with the piano either accompanying, echoing, or positioning itself as a rival force. Enormous imaginative skill and craftsmanship clearly went into this piece. But it seemed, finally, more brilliant and eclectic than deeply engrossing — impressive stuff, but somehow empty of absorbing content.

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After the intermission came *Piano Study I* (1997) by Korean composer Hyo-Shin Na, ably played by Thomas Schultz. Two textures overlap in this piece, and the pianist's hands are superimposed on the keyboard. Sustained melodic fragments emerge and disappear as the underlying patterns interpenetrate each other. Schultz brought out the composition's pentatonically tinged web of details with precision, clarity, and insight.

Open, Outgoing *Earplay Fantasy*

The final work was Andrew Imbrie's *Earplay Fantasy* (1996), in four movements, a work written (as the title suggests) for this ensemble and conducted here with grace and authority by Mary Chun. The piece has an

open, outgoing nature and is full of colorful, soloistic writing for all the instruments. The extended cello solo ending the first movement, the percussion's dominant role in the scherzo, and the piano's thoughtful dialogue with the concerted strings and winds in the slow third movement stand out.

Characteristically, Imbrie begins the faster movements with a dramatic or playful flourish that quickly expends its momentum, leading to an expectant pause in the action. He then introduces a completely contrasting idea at a slower tempo before reanimating the original impulse. This practice, imaginatively varied, creates an ebb and flow of energy that keeps things flexible while broadening and deepening the piece's emotive range.

Earplay Fantasy was an exciting, stimulating, affecting conclusion to the program. A brief, semi-improvised encore incorporating a familiar tune reminded us that we were also there to celebrate Imbrie's 80th birthday. The gala reception following the concert enhanced the festive mood.

(Jules Langert is a composer and teacher who resides in the East Bay.)

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