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At 20, Earplay sharp as ever

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic
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Mary Chun for Kosman's Earplay review. on 9/1/04

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The venturesome ensemble Earplay long ago laid claim to a distinctive artistic niche in the Bay Area's contemporary-music scene. For two decades, the group has provided a welcome forum for a certain brand of intricate, well-crafted chamber music, particularly by local composers, and afforded it the advocacy and skill that it needs in order to shine.

Tuesday's concert in [Herbst Theatre](#) -- modestly scaled but rich in ideas -- marked the beginning of the group's 20th season, and it encapsulated what has been most characteristic about that history. The four shortish works on the program, two of them world premieres commissioned by Earplay, boasted a combination of intellectual rigor and textural transparency that rewarded the willing listener.

None offered easy listening, perhaps, and there were moments when the spirit of invention outran the dictates of formal logic. But there was a crystalline, hard-edged allure to even the far-flung writing, and it was backed up by first-rate performances.

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The evening's most potent offering was the premiere of "Sappho Fragments," a quartet of short settings for soprano and string trio by San Jose composer [Richard Aldag](#). Aldag underscores the disconnected nature of his texts by writing seamless chordal textures for the strings, in all but one of the movements, then punctuating them with brief, arrestingly rhetorical interjections by the singer.

The effect is to leave the listener grasping at the tiny, elusive snippets of Sappho (all we have, tragically, of that unforgettable poetic voice). The string music, meanwhile -- now elegiac, now vivacious -- passes in wordless eloquence, as if hinting at all that has been lost.

The performance was graced by yet another jaw-dropping appearance by soprano Elza van den Heever, an alumna of the [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#) who is now a San Francisco Opera Adler Fellow and one of the most exciting young singers to pass through the Bay Area in years. Her singing -- robust, sensuous and achingly precise -- lent extraordinary depth to the score, and the trio of violinist [Terrie Baune](#), violist [Ellen Ruth Rose](#) and cellist [Thalia Moore](#) played beautifully under the baton of conductor [Mary Chun](#).

As a nod to Earplay's history, the program began with a reprise from the initial season. "A Whirling and a Wandering Fire," a tart, fantastical trio by [Eric Moe](#), got a vivid performance by flutist [Tod Brody](#), clarinetist [Peter Josheff](#) and pianist [Karen Rosenak](#). Brody also gave a coolly fluent rendition of "Memo 4," a curvaceous and predominantly lyrical flute solo by Bernard Rands.

After intermission came the premiere of "A Three Piece Suite," a punchy, densely packed sextet by San Francisco composer [Wayne Peterson](#). The first movement harks back to the composer's days as a jazz pianist, alternating a cool strut with more urgent counterpoint; the finale sets the instrumentalists chasing breathlessly after one another in a fierce set-to. Chun conducted a sharply profiled performance.

Earplay: The 20th season will continue with concerts March 14 and May 23 at the [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum](#). Tickets: \$20. Call (415) 978- 2787 or go to www.earplay.org.

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