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By Jules Langert

Earplay, San Francisco's prominent forward-looking, vital new music ensemble, is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this season, and Tuesday's opening concert at Herbst Theater attracted an enthusiastically full house of supporters and well-wishers. Over the years, Earplay has reliably provided its audiences with some of the richest and liveliest programming to be found anywhere in the Bay Area. On this concert, premieres by Wayne Peterson and Richard Aldag, both commissioned by Earplay, were featured.

Peterson's amusingly (mis)titled sextet, *A Three Piece Suite* (2003), which ended the concert, was the more substantial and enjoyable work. In its first movement, "Out of the Blue," which the composer describes as "a joyful reminiscence of my life as a bebop pianist," the idiom of Fifties and early Sixties jazz is instantly recognizable, and Peterson sustains its musical flow with great verve and affection. Treated as an ongoing series of loosely connected episodes and filtered

**CONTEMPORARY
MUSIC REVIEW**

Mixed Results

November 9, 2004

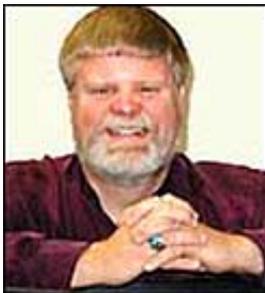


Eric Moe

through the composer's modernist sensibility, the movement reads as a dreamlike recollection of youthful innocence and discovery.

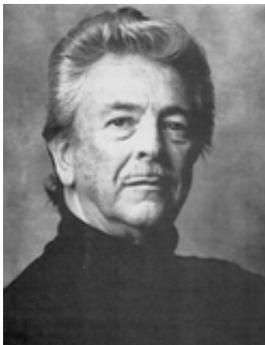
The slower second movement is more reflective and linear, punctuated by moments of homophonic repose, like brief ruminations. Peterson conceives of the finale as a kind of interrupted chase, playful and unpredictable to the end. Mary Chun conducted a smooth performance of this piece, which has within it a varied assortment of moods and sensations not so easily sorted out after a single hearing.

A bit disjunct



Mark Satterwhite

Richard Aldag's *Sappho Fragments* (2004) for string trio and soprano sets four of the poet's short, erotically charged verses in a mostly angular, declamatory style, while the strings have a separate, largely independent role. This dichotomy between voice and instruments lent an abstract feeling to the music, with the forces seemingly out of expressive alignment. Soprano Elza Van den Heever has a rich, beautiful operatic voice and is a performer of real conviction, but she seemed sometimes ill at ease coping with Aldag's disjunct writing. In addition, her strong vocal presence tended to overwhelm the thinner, more delicately scored string ensemble. Overall there was an unresolved separateness both in the piece and in the performance; perhaps conductor Mary Chun could have evened out the balance and made things cohere more than they did.



Wayne Peterson

A Whirling and a Wandering Fire (1986) by Eric Moe was composed and performed during Earplay's inaugural season, and it held up fairly well as the opening work on this concert. Clarinetist Peter Josheff (who played in the original performance), flutist Tod Brody, and pianist Karen Rosenak gave it the kind of kinetic, edgy performance that brought out its dramatic qualities. The music's tense, restless energy seems to be seeking some climactic encounter in which to exhaust its jerky, start-and-stop momentum. In that way the piece lives up to its Yeatsian title (explained by Moe in his program notes). The resolution comes in a toccata-like onslaught of rapid notes for the full



ensemble that did not really, for me, satisfy the need that had been built up. As a result I felt that the piece somewhat fizzled out before it ended.

Also on the program, Bernard Rands' *Memo 4* (1997), a work for solo flute, was a showpiece for Tod Brody's skillful playing. In a few long episodes that were at times motivically obsessive, at other times lyrical, and occasionally explored some striking registral contrasts, the piece was a kind of agreeably interesting soliloquy. It was also the only work of the evening, to my knowledge, that had no link to Earplay's anniversary celebration. .

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

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