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By Benjamin Frandzel

Earplay concluded its 20th-anniversary season in fine form last Monday night, mining its customary mix of local, national and international composers for a series of worthy pieces. A packed house at Yerba Buena Center's Forum responded appreciatively, as strong performances addressed a panorama of contemporary styles.

Richard Festinger's *From The Beginning* (String Quartet No.2), a world premiere, found this composer working at a very high level in a work marked by intelligence, focused clarity and expressive depth. The first of two movements, very slow and deeply beautiful, employed muted melodic fragments as the basis for brief imitative episodes. Festinger took a patient approach with these ideas, letting the piece develop organically, with high value given to space and silence. The instrumental lines gradually lengthened and the resultant harmonic language was strongly affecting, ending with an allusion to the movement's beginnings.

The pace sped up for the second movement, with tremolos creating momentum to support brief, pointed lines above them. The lyrical figures of the opening movement gave way to tighter, more chromatic lines, as the ensemble writing sustained the initial quality of a complex,

thoughtful dialogue at a faster pace. Violinists Terrie Baune and Lisa Weiss, violist Kurt Rohde and cellist Thalia Moore played with individual and collective expressiveness, responding to the work's lack of excess and its focus on essential elements with a sensitive performance.

Uneven

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

A Broad Palette

May 23, 2005



Richard Festinger



Wang Xi-Lin's Quartet Op.41, for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, a US premiere, began with an elemental power that could not be sustained for the entire piece. Opening with impassioned solo cello gestures, the piece soon added bold, exclamatory outbursts from the full ensemble. This sort of theatrical sensibility may stem from Xi-Lin's many years conducting and composing for singing and dancing troupes in China, and the piece went on in this mode for quite some time before giving way to an introspective solo clarinet interlude. The full ensemble was brought back for a brief and somewhat static episode recalling Steve Reich, an inconclusive ending to a piece that ranged from elevated to pedestrian. Cellist Dan Reiter and clarinetist Carey Bell, both guest artists for this concert, delivered deeply committed performances in their solo roles.

Two works for the full ensemble filled the program's second half, ending with William Kraft's *Vintage Renaissance and Beyond*, for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello and piano, a world premiere. This accomplished composer's tribute to music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance borrowed music by Francesco de la Torre and Hildegard Von Bingen and an anonymous *bransle* to build a sort of call-and-response between the past and present. The older tunes were allowed either to stand on their own or to be supported by contemporary harmonies and counterpoint, or were fragmented and reorchestrated, then alternated with Kraft's replies in his own musical language.

Kraft's abundant technique was evident as he worked with this musical material in a variety of ways and produced an attractive piece. His great skill as an orchestrator was deployed in transforming the older tunes through changing tone colors, with nice touches like string harmonics combined with celesta. Altogether, this piece made more of an impression for its level of craft than its degree of inspiration, though the sure balance and skillful pacing of Mary Chun's conducting brought out the work's potential and produced some lovely moments.

A splendid salute

Olly Wilson's piece, *Andy's Choruses*, for the full ensemble plus percussion, is a fine work written in tribute to Andrew Imbrie, and Wilson fills the piece with his friend's clear sense of line and sensitivity to ensemble interaction. Inspired by a theme from Imbrie's 3rd Piano Concerto, Wilson approaches the ensemble with an orchestral conception, as instruments trade the lead role in the piece, each subtly shaded by a rotating mix of fellow ensemble members. A sharp performance led by Chun highlighted the work's compositional logic as well as its charm.

The program began with Jonathan Harvey's *The Riot*, for flute, bass

clarinet and piano. Contrary to its title, the piece was marked by Harvey's typical attention to detail and elegance of gesture, but lacked the enigmatic character and mystical bent that animate his best work. From section to section, the work was delineated by differences in range, texture, and rhythmic character, and even revealed some surprising commonality with contemporary jazz harmony. The overall effect was a bit schematic, but the performance by flutist Tod Brody, clarinetist Peter Josheff and pianist Karen Rosenak was both nuanced and energetic.

(Benjamin Frandzel is a Bay Area musician and writer. In addition to writing concert music, he has collaborated with dance, theater, and visual artists, and has written about music for many publications and musical organizations. He is currently a graduate student in composition at San Francisco State University.)

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