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Earplay at Herbst Theatre

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Of love and re-birth

Earplay entered their 25th season on Monday, Feb. 9, at Herbst Theater with a warm and witty program titled "Ear and There." Conductor Mary Chun, in remarks before the concert, described the season as one "highlighting the rich, new-music community and the tremendous amount of innovation in the Bay Area." This group of excellent musicians, despite parlous times, has achieved venerable status, and the program included a list of over 250 modern composers whose works they have performed, including over 100 world premieres.

They eased in with Carlos Sanchez-Gutiérrez' light-hearted ... *and of course Henry the Horse*... four movements that referenced works of art. Clarinet, violin and four-hands piano made for lively coloring, as did the staccato delivery. Peter Josheff delivered rhythmic bass clarinet outbursts as the piano rumbled and stumbled. Sanchez-Gutierrez described the Beatles original as having "an aura of decadence, nostalgia and futurism," qualities he sought in this piece. The second movement, *Mandala Tequila*, sought a balance of mechanical and mischievous with slow disconnected piano notes, paired high and low extremes of the keyboard. The clarinet and violin supplied short phonemes, dashed lines in monotone. In *Machine with Artichoke* they answered piano cloudbursts with longer expostulations, and then took it home in *The Way Things Go*, as violinist Terrie Baune answered Josheff's gestures with high nervous lines. Simple high and low piano lines created a plastic surface, a Formica ground for an argument in a diner.

Sam Nichols was on hand for the premiere of his *Unnamed, Jr.* for clarinet, viola and piano. Named for *Unnamed*, his chamber opera in progress, it contained themes and textures from the larger work. And like many reductions, it was pithy and full of movement.

Josheff returned with reflective clarinet passages, completed by Ellen Ruth Rose, whose viola gave back muddled echoes. Their pitch collection slowly merged into strings of notes, a sensual dialog and a mime-like mirroring. Karen Rosenak supplied very different material on the piano, ranging from "tuning" sounds to a sparse left hand that anchored the viola and clarinet.

Lyrical and articulate, it winged like a love song across a reddened sky.

Influenced by her years at IRCAM, Kaija Saariaho often combines instrumental and electronic components in her work. One of the most respected composers of our time, her trio for viola, cello and piano, *Je sens un deuxième couer*, grew out of *Adriana Mater*, her 2006 opera.

Je dévoile ma peau (I reveal my skin) constructs each voice: piano, played by Michael Seth Orland, opened with single repeated notes, points of crystallization for severe passages (dis)connected by erasure. Rose's viola shimmered in stratospheric slides, and cellist Thalia Moore bestowed a softer membrane, a biological sucking and billowing.

Harsher material, nearly violent with repetition, finally gave way to the final *Je sens*, two hearts beating within a pregnant woman. Rich and deep, Saariaho invokes the love-rhythms of the sea with cello hiss and viola slide. We hear madness and loyalty over a bed of broken piano chords. "Doloroso, sempre con amore," she writes above the final movement. Painful, always with love.

Orland and Rosenak returned on the second half for Seymour Shifrin's 1959 *The Modern Temper*, another four-hands piano piece that defined mid-century modernism with its tone clusters and chromaticism. Rosenak supplied gravitas for pitches that seemed too random to be arbitrary.

Then all the players returned for Bruce Christian Bennett's *From the Ashes*, a work that featured a mesmerizing gong cadenza by percussionist Chris Froh. Bennett was also one of the four composers in the Berkeley Symphony's Under Construction program (Feb 17 *Piedmont Post*).

Bennett created his phoenix resurrection with rippling piano loops and bass clarinet/piccolo duets. Josheff and flutist Tod Brody returned after the gong birth-cadenza with separate soliloquies, then ascended through whips and slides to a final unison.

The adventurous Earplayers return to Herbst Theatre March 22 in "Outside In" with two World premieres.

—Adam Broner

This article originally appeared in the *Piedmont Post*.

Photo: Peter Josheff, a founder of Earplay, performed on clarinet and bass clarinet.

