Finding heart in the abstract

"Music begins where poetry leaves off..." was the title and premise of Earplay's season opening concert, held last Monday, Feb. 10, at San Francisco's ODC Theater, and their program seemed to bear that out. The five short and thoughtful pieces all quoted past forms, but made it vital and truly personal, just as poets pay homage to lasting truths while looking out of their own window. Earplay and the Empyrean Ensemble, added another awareness: those piano chords, which have been likened to the internal luminescence of Messiaen, were touched by synaesthesia, a composer's ability to "see" the music. Moore also shares that gift and brought to her part an impressionist painter's awareness of the subject as light. The work was skilful and understated, almost dream.

Like the artificial constraints of Oulipo, this was constructed poetry (and deconstructs through construction!), and buoyantly to help keep the three lines on task.

The "poetry" continued in Dan Reiter's Sonata for Flute and Harp, another curious interplaying of very different timbres. Reiter, a composer who is also the principal cellist of the Oakland Symphony and a frequent collaborator of Earplay, has written much music for cello and harp, as it is the instrument of his wife, Natalie Cox. Sonata for Flute and Harp was written in 1982 when he was part of a trio for flute, harp and cello.

"Writing this piece for [bassist] Angela opened up my life. I purged myself into it," revealed Dan afterwards, and spoke of the beginning of his composer's journey, a polygot that combines threads of many cultures, with Eastern European modalities taking turns with Middle Eastern, and flavored with the rhythms of flamenco and tabla.

Flutist Tod Brody delivered throaty rivers of notes interwoven with harpist Karen Gottlieb's slyly spangles, like an ancient Greek mating of Earth and Sky. But this mesh of folk idioms was carefully constructed, and therein is the poetry. "The piece opens with a single note, F sharp, which is surrounded by notes of equal distance...the basis for the piece as a whole," according to Reiter. And that defines the relative dynamic between musical line and structure, a symbiosis between a message and medium that slowly unwound into a unity of flute and harp, of slurs and silvering.

Wistful clarinet runs and more forceful cello phrases were underscored by strangely coloristic piano chords, all delivered with the measured cadences of memory. Josheff, a composer in his own right, later told me that he was performing on a new clarinet with excellent action, and one could hear that in his very liquid lines. Thalia Moore, the associate principal cellist with the SF Opera Orchestra and a founding member of both Earplay and the Empyrean Ensemble, added another awareness: those piano chords, which have been likened to the internal luminescence of Messiaen, were touched by synaesthesia, a composer's ability to "see" the music. Moore also shares that gift and brought to her part an impressionist painter's awareness of the subject as light. The work was skilful and understated, almost dream.

Violinist Terrie Baune then joined Moore and pianist Brenda Tom for Tamar Diesendruck's devilishly difficult trio, which have been likened to the internal luminescence of Messiaen, were touched by synaesthesia, a composer's ability to "see" the music. Moore also shares that gift and brought to her part an impressionist painter's awareness of the subject as light. The work was skilful and understated, almost dream. Earplay and the Empyrean Ensemble, added another awareness: those piano chords, which have been likened to the internal luminescence of Messiaen, were touched by synaesthesia, a composer's ability to "see" the music. Moore also shares that gift and brought to her part an impressionist painter's awareness of the subject as light. The work was skilful and understated, almost dream.

The second half of the program, Moore returned for a cello solo, George Crumb's early Sonata for Solo Violoncello (1955). This truculent experiment was full of youthful ardor, opening with acidic plucks and then slowly drawing us in with heartfelt lyricism balanced by the bite of tritones. The second movement was all short gestures and questions, and the finale used a dramatic vocabulary of close-knit arpeggios.

On That Day (1991). Based on the biblical tower of Babel, the three instruments played similar material, but in an asymmetrical round that slowly converged for one measure of relief, and then diverged again into near-chaos. It was cheery and quirky, and Mary Chun conducted the instruments.

The second half of the program, Moore returned for a cello solo, George Crumb's early Sonata for Solo Violoncello (1955). This truculent experiment was full of youthful ardor, opening with acidic plucks and then slowly drawing us in with heartfelt lyricism balanced by the bite of tritones. The second movement was all short gestures and questions, and the finale used a dramatic vocabulary of close-knit arpeggios.

Violinist Terrie Baune then joined Moore and pianist Brenda Tom for Tamar Diesendruck's devilishly difficult trio, On That Day (1991). Based on the biblical tower of Babel, the three instruments played similar material, but in an asymmetrical round that slowly converged for one measure of relief, and then diverged again into near-chaos. It was cheery and quirky, and Mary Chun conducted the instruments.

Like the artificial constraints of Oulipo, this was constructed poetry (and deconstructs through construction!), and buoyantly successful because of—or despite—its structure.

Earplay gathers some of the best soloists in the Bay Area to explore new terrain, and their concerts are always illuminating. Warming up for their next concert, March 31 at ODC Theater, will be a lecture on contemporary music, held on Thursday, March 20 at SF's Museum of Performance and Design, 7:30 p.m. at 893B Folsom St, SF.

—Adam Broner

Photos: top of composer Ann Callaway; middle of composer Dan Reiter, and below of Earplay from left: Peter Josheff, Thalia Moore, Tod Brody, Ellen Ruth Rose, Terrie Baune, and Mary Chun. Not pictured, pianist Brenda Tom.