

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: eighth blackbird at Waetjen Auditorium (April 29)

by Daniel Hathaway



When you mostly present ensembles as portable as string quartets, what do you do when an ensemble requires a whole lot of percussion? In the case of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society and eighth blackbird, you move the concert to where the percussion lives — to Cleveland State University’s Waetjen Auditorium, where the celebrated new music sextet performed their acoustic program, “Still in Motion,” on Tuesday evening, April 29.

As season finales go, this was a doozy. eighth blackbird is famous for performing the unplayable and making thorny pieces engaging for audiences. As they rightly claim on their website, the ensemble “combines the finesse of a string quartet, the energy of a rock band and the audacity of a storefront theater company.”

On Tuesday, the sextet, which included flutist Tim Munro, clarinetist Michael J. Maccaferri, violinist and violist Yvonne Lamb, cellist Nicholas Potinos, percussionist Doug Perkins and pianist Lisa Kaplan, played six radically different works by Bryce Dessner, Tom Johnson and György Ligeti, Richard Parry, Brett Dean and Steven Mackey.

Dessner’s *Murder Ballades* (2013), which served as a curtain-raiser, were busy, spiky bits of Americana chronicling nefarious acts of violence in attractive packaging.

The second and third pieces really counted as one that interweaved four Ligeti piano Etudes arranged by Munro and Kaplan with Tom Johnson’s bizarrely entertaining *Counting Duets* (1982). Let’s just say that you had to be there to fully appreciate four unruly piano pieces divvied up among six players alternating with groups of players shouting number sequences at each other. How did they memorize those?

Richard Parry’s *Duo for Heart and Breath* provided a soothing respite as Kaplan and Lamb played slow, undulating music to the rhythm of heart beats and breathing.

The most serious work, Brett Dean's *Sextet: Old Kings in Exile (2011)* was an intense, three-movement nightmare inspired by the chronicle of an Alzheimer's patient, featuring strange effects produced by drawing a super ball across drum heads and gongs. A gripping and effective piece played with incisive drama by six superb musicians.

The evening lightened up with a three-movement suite arranged from Steven Mackey's 2008 score for *Slide*, eighth blackbird's Grammy-winning CD. The tracks *Slide of Dog*, *Depending* and *Lonely Motel* translated winningly into all-instrumental versions and closed a memorable program on a high note.

eighth blackbird was born at Oberlin out of Tim Weiss's Contemporary Music Ensemble nearly twenty years ago. It's always terrific to have them return to the area to stretch our ears and challenge our musical complacency. After the concert when I went up to say hello, Tim Munro's first words were "what surprised you?" Cheers to the Cleveland Chamber Music Society for choosing to end its 64th season with something very different.w

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