

Wet Ink Ensemble Trio to perform in Stull Hall at Oberlin February 12

by Mike Telin



Founded in 1998 as a collection of composers, improvisers and interpreters committed to making adventurous music, the New York City-based [Wet Ink Ensemble](#) has quickly garnered an international reputation for their innovative and virtuosic performances. Although the ensemble usually performs as a septet, on Friday, February 12 beginning at 6:30 pm in Oberlin Conservatory's Stull Recital Hall,

the Wet Ink Trio, Josh Modney (violin), Eric Wubbels (piano), and Sam Pluta (electronics) will present a concert titled *hydra | the children of fire*. A solo electronic set by Sarah Snider will precede the Trio's performance.

"The Trio version of the ensemble was formed last year," violinist Josh Modney said during an recent interview. "Although our main ensemble is a septet, we also wanted to play repertoire by Wet Ink composers that has been written for smaller configurations."

Modney, who joined Wet Ink eight years ago, pointed out that although they wanted to tour Eric's 2012 composition *the children of fire come looking for fire*, they were in need of another piece that would fill out the program. "We asked Sam to write something that would involve himself, so in 2014 he wrote *hydra* (for violin, piano & live electronics). We made our first Trio tour to England in January 2015. We've also toured this program to California, so this will be our third tour."

Wubbels' *the children of fire come looking for fire* was written for Josh Modney, who worked with the composer over several months developing the material on which the pieces is based. "This was the first that I had the opportunity to work in a collaborative

fashion with a composer,” Modney said. “At the beginning, Eric was just throwing out ideas about different sounds and techniques and we worked on them together. It was an intense process, but I enjoyed being there every step of the way. In my training, compositions were always handed down from on high and the performer was only supposed to interpret a work. Traditionally there is no interaction between the two. I found the experience of being involved with the composition to be more rewarding and I really appreciate Eric’s willingness to write in that way. Now we have a piece that is very special to both of us.”

Modney said that he learned a lot from the experience, especially how much he discovered about his own instrument. “There are things that are kind of old-school that Eric integrated into the piece, like left-hand pizzicatos that you often find in a Paganini show piece. It also includes techniques that I had not tried before, but through the process of collaboration we discovered techniques that were totally new to me. For instance, at the beginning, there’s a particular ‘over-pressure’ that is used to produce scratch sounds, that I think are rich and beautiful, but that you might also call noise. We discovered this technique during one of our early workshops. Eric made a recording of the sound and put it into spectral analysis software and used that as his inspiration to generate more material for the piece, which also includes a quote from piano work by Brahms”

In his program notes, Eric Wubbles writes: *In the context of this piece, the idea of the wedge (i.e. “>”) is converted to a neume that functions on every structural level of the piece, from global trajectories to micro-gestures and even physical motions for the performers. Additionally, the metaphorical implications of this shape (contraction, filtering, focusing in from a wide field to a single point; to stretch it further — tuning; further still — renunciation) structure the unfolding of the material over the course of the form. The material from Brahms is heard fleetingly at the end, rasterized to just intonation.*

Now that Modney and Wubbles have lived with the piece, the violist said that the obvious next step was to perform the 25-minute work without the benefit of a score. “We first performed it from memory in January of 2015 and we haven’t looked back.”

The inspiration for Sam Pluta’s *hydra* can be traced to the many-headed Greek mythological serpent whose heads grew back after they were cut off. The work also brings together the many aspects of the composer’s work, which include electronic playback, acoustic and electronic improvisation, just intonation, and noise.

“At the beginning, there is a pre-recorded composed tape part with the violin and piano droning over it, but for the rest of the piece Sam performs the electronics live,” Modney

pointed out. “Sam is a dynamic performer with live electronics and I really like watching him do what he does.”

Pluta’s musical ideas also necessitated the development of new ways to notate the complex musical material. “It’s modular, meaning that in my part there are boxes with material that I play in sequence as fast as I can,” Modney explained. “There’s a certain freedom within the material. I’m not improvising, but I *am* taking liberties. But in the process of trying to play these things as quickly and as musically as I can, the result is very frenetic and virtuosic, so you would expect the notation to be much more complex than it is, based on what you’re hearing.”

hydra (violin solo)

The image displays a musical score for a violin solo titled "hydra". It consists of two staves of music. The first staff contains ten measures with the following performance instructions and dynamics: "metal mute sul pont" (mp), "pizz" (f), "pizz" (p), a measure with a circle and arrow indicating a slide, "norm" (mf), "arco sul pont" (mp), "arco sul pont", and "sul pont". The second staff contains ten measures with the following performance instructions and dynamics: "norm" (mp), a measure with a circle and arrow, "arco sul pont" (mp), "arco sul pont" (pp), "norm" (mp), a measure with a circle and arrow, "arco sul pont" (mf), and "arco sul pont" (mp). The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

As ambassadors for this kind of experimental music, Modney and his colleagues are looking forward to the third tour of this program. “This music deserves the kind of hearings that traditional classical music gets, and repeat performances, rather than the usual one-off new music concert are important to achieving that goal,”

I ended our conversation by asking Josh Modney what Wet Ink calls their music. “We identify mainly as contemporary classical, at least that is how we would put it in a calendar listing, although sometimes it could also be put into jazz/experimental. But our favorite term to describe it is ‘adventurous music.’”

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