

NEOSonicFest: CIM New Music Ensemble at Bop Stop (April 7)

by David Kulma



Concerts by CIM's New Music Ensemble have such startlingly high levels of performance that it's hard to remember that the musicians are, in fact, students. In their concert on Saturday night, April 7 at the Bop Stop as a part of this year's NEOSonicFest, the ensemble gave immaculate

performances of works selected from their 2017-2018 repertoire.

A sneak premiere of David Rakowski's *Breakdown* (2013) — due to be officially premiered on April 15 — opened the program. Featuring violinist James Thompson, violist Michael Jones, cellist Joseph Teeter, and pianist Sichen Ma, the Bop Stop performance was both sprightly and menacing. The light swing in the middle, the deep unsettling low piano and plucked cello, the passed-around repeated notes, and the glissando ending give this music a feeling of continually leading up to a high point that never comes.

Rakowski is well-known in new music circles for writing a huge number of études for piano, 100 to be exact. He is well on his way with préludes as well — 75 as of this writing. Maria Paola Parini expertly shared five of the préludes in what was likely the premiere of each. “Zanzara” (No. 44), “Rustle” (30), and “Zap” (26) danced around the keyboard, variously tinkling, rippling, bouncing, and pounding in virtuosic displays. On the other hand, “Canary” (66) waltzed off-kilter and “Alce Americano” (46) painted a moose in ascending Scriabinesque rolled chords. Rakowski writes well for the piano, and his titles are humorous and memorable.

The feat of the evening was Stephen Hartke's four-movement violin duo *Oh Them Rats Is Mean In My Kitchen* (1985). Thompson and Beatrice Hsieh were ferocious, slithery, grungy, and lithe in this homage to early blues. Hartke's fiendish writing is a barnbuster, including vigorous plucking and strumming against dizzying bowed lines, unsettling upbow crescendos amid scrappy gestures, and sliding grooves with crazed flurries. Thompson and Hsieh perfectly embodied this devilish fiddling in sound.

The concert ended with the second complete performance of Keith Fitch's *The Range of Light* (2016-17). Featuring the words of the naturalist John Muir, Fitch's work lovingly paints a piquant sound picture. The "upness" of mountains was shaped by Connor Monday's opening and closing regal horn solos and baritone Matthew Brennan's recitation. The three sung movements and interlude spin with pungent impasto colors. Memorable moments included trilling solos from bass flutist Moises Lopez Ruiz, clarinetist Zachary West's fluttering atop piano prickles from Taylor Flowers, and crystalline lines from Thompson and cellist Daniel Blumhard. Brennan deserves high praise for his clear diction and resonant tone throughout Fitch's oblong melodies. The work's peaked shape flowed smoothly under conductor Dean Buck.

Fitch's choice of Muir feels right. The naturalist's overwrought paens place a single human in awe of nature. Now a century later, these beautiful places — and the humans setting eyes on them — are in existential danger. May we soon change ourselves so that future generations may experience these beatitudes as Muir and Fitch have.

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