

## Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble plays first of five concerts at CMA (September 27)

by Daniel Hathaway



Having birthed such first-rate new music ensembles as eighth blackbird and ICE (International Contemporary Ensemble), the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble has been long overdue for its own regular presence in Cleveland. That finally came to pass on Saturday afternoon, September 27, when Timothy Weiss and the Oberlin CME gave the first of five

concerts in a new subset of the Cleveland Museum of Arts Performing Arts Series. Saturday's performance in Gartner Auditorium painted the ensemble's reputation with a new layer of glory.

The fourteen student musicians were joined by Oberlin faculty members Richard Hawkins, clarinet, and George Sakakeeny, bassoon, for just over an hour's worth of music by living composers. So alive, in fact, that two of them, Chen Yi and Zhou Long, were present to join Weiss in a twenty-minute pre-concert chat. Yi and Long happen to be a married couple, as are Bernard Rands and Augusta Read Thomas, the other two composers on Saturday's program, leading Weiss to quip that it might have been dubbed "The Divorce Court Concert."

Long's *Tales from the Nine Bells* (2014), scored for clarinet (Richard Hawkins), violin (Yuri Popowycz), viola (Rachel Halvorson) and piano (John Etsell), evokes with modest instrumental resources the Chinese legend of great bells that ring spontaneously in wind-swept mountain caverns.

Though Hawkins was singled out typographically and had a large range of material to cover, he integrated his part skillfully into the fine ensemble. Among the highlights: Popowycz played a long, high harmonic with an unwavering bow and Etsell teased subtle pings from the piano by plucking its strings. Highly rhythmic dances, a *furioso* section

and tricky unison passages united all four players into a fascinating musical web. Though uncondacted, the performance was so unified and tight that one slightly spattered pizzicato really stood out.

Chen Yi's *Sparkle* (1992) for flute & piccolo (Amanda Dame), e-flat clarinet (Ryan Toher), violin (Hattie Ahn), cello (Joshua Morris), bass (Casey Karr), piano (John Etsell) and two percussionists (Hunter Brown and Dan King) was all kinetic energy under Weiss's baton. Exuberant trills and delightful conversations, especially between clarinet and viola, ignited its textures, and Toher's excellent control perfectly blended a sometimes unruly instrument into the ensemble. *Sparkle* ended with a long, fading clarinet note, finally dismissed with a sudden lick from the flute.

Something of a contemporary *Pictures at an Exhibition*, August Read Thomas's *Bassoon Concertino* (2013) takes its inspiration from paintings by Paul Klee (*Rope Dancer*), Wassily Kandinski (*Sky Blue*), and Joan Miró (*Ladders across the blue sky in a wheel of fire*). Here, Sakakeeny was supported an ensemble of seven players (Amanda Dame, flute, Ryan Toher, clarinet, Julia Suh, violin, Rachel Halvorson, viola, Joshua Morris, cello, Caitlin Mehrtens, harp, and Shihui Yin, piano).

The whimsical, three-movement work moves from dance-y syncopations to static textures relieved by piano, harp and bassoon (representing the floating objects in Kandinsky's sky) to a riot of repeated notes framed by wide-ranging leaps from the bassoon. Sakakeeny's mellow, colorful tone carried well across the footlights, and Weiss and his players brought Thomas's score to life with spirited accuracy.

Cerebral and partially alleatoric, Bernard Rands's *Scherzi* (1974) was the oldest work on the program, and might be one of the most serious sets of "jokes" you'll ever hear. The first four of its short, untitled movements each featured one instrument in the mixed quartet: violin (Henry Allison), clarinet (Ryan Toher), cello (Joshua Morris) and piano (Shihui Yin), in that order. The uncondacted musicians each took their turn with flair and presence, finally joining together on an equal basis in the last movement.

Too frequently, new music gets performed without enough preparation. These meticulously rehearsed performances were confident and settled, yet sounded completely fresh. Any composer would be thrilled to have their music treated with the level of care that Timothy Weiss and the CME lavished on the four pieces we heard on Saturday.

Also too frequently, the varying instrumentation of new pieces makes for endless and chaotic stage shifts, but this concert was planned and executed with impressive efficiency.

Fans of new music — as well as the merely curious — should take note of the next four Oberlin CME concerts on Saturdays at 2pm: November 1, December 13 (with special

guest and Oberlin alumna Jennifer Koh), March 7 and April 11 (featuring pianist Thomas Rosenkranz). At \$5 a ticket, it's a steal.

*Photo of an OCME recording session with violinist David Bowlin by Kevin Reeves.*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 4, 2014.*

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