

Tenth Muse at Fairchild Chapel, Oberlin (December 2)

by Zoë Madonna, *guest contributor*



The seats at Oberlin Conservatory's historical performance (HP) division concerts are usually warmed by only a few faculty and devotees. Be warned: that may not be the case for much longer. Students Parker Ramsay and Jackson Studzinski recently assembled a bunch of historically informed tricksters to form Tenth Muse, which made its first public outing on December 2 in Oberlin's Fairchild Chapel.

Programs were not distributed. Ramsay let the tiny audience know from the organ loft that titles also might not be announced, before launching into Michelangelo Rossi's *Toccata VII*, a 17th century piece for organ as chromatic and dissonant as anything ever aspired to by a modernist. He played as fluidly and freely as if he were improvising it all. Finney Chapel's much larger pipe organ has the power to shake the stage, but Ramsay proved that Fairchild Chapel's German Baroque replica could transport the room to another universe.

The concert's midpoint was "Pur ti miro," the final love duet from Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Sopranos Christine Jay and Sarah Lynn's voices intertwined sweetly and rapturously over Ramsay's harpsichord accompaniment. Even without knowing what the piece was, there was no ambiguity about the utter happiness of the text and music.

That midpoint would have also been the high point, had Ramsay not catapulted the music into the present day with his own composition, *Half-draw*. A low bass note sounded for an instant before a massive cluster lit up the air all at once, the vibrations going straight to the pews below. The piece was composed for the Fairchild organ, which is tuned in mean-tone temperament with split sharps.



In layman's terms: on a regular keyboard, A-sharp and B-flat share the same key, but in this case, they are two slightly different pitches played with different keys, and the same goes for some of the other "black keys." ("Half-draw" refers to the possibility in a mechanical-action organ of drawing the stop knobs somewhere between on and off, producing microtones.) The chords shimmered, and the sound cycled about the room like an air raid siren from an icy planet. Out of an instrument constructed to sound old, Ramsay conjured something entirely new and thrilling.

The ensemble is still figuring out what gels and what does not with larger-scale pieces. Bonifazio Graziani's *Missa de vestiva i colli* for five voices (in this case, soprano, two sackbuts, cornetto, baroque cello, and continuo organ) was shakily balanced and shakily played in parts. Having sailed smoothly through some of the fastest and least intuitive runs the Baroque repertoire has to offer, soprano Christine Jay had to push her voice almost to a screaming timbre to be heard above the powerful winds. However, the student musicians ably played their notoriously difficult instruments, and that "broken consort" never truly broke down.

The finale, Terry Riley's *In C* in Baroque tuning, was programmed as a joking poke at the administration for leaving HP instruments out of the recent "open" performance of the piece in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Conservatory building. Fortunately, the deep resonances of the chapel and the rich tones of the instruments couldn't have made the music sound ugly if they tried. However, most of the musicians on the full stage played as ensembles of one, not looking at each other or paying any mind to where their companions were in the sequence of miniature ideas that makes up the piece. Some musicians in the larger pickup ensemble (assembled last-minute) had not rehearsed or practiced it, and Riley's performance notes were not distributed along with the scores. Learning this clarified why it started as *In C* and ended in complete confusion. Next time, better make a rehearsal mandatory, joke or no joke.

Tenth Muse's website says that they "invite listeners to be immersed into a cohesive musical experience." This concert was certainly an experience, and everyone was

certainly immersed. Greater cohesion will hopefully come later. For now, if Tenth Muse wishes to accomplish its goal of shaking things up, they're on the right track. Do them (and yourself) a favor, fill one of those empty seats next semester, and let your brain expand. If they continue like this, those seats won't be empty for long.

In November, Madonna, a fourth-year Oberlin student, won the 2014 Rubin Institute for Music Criticism prize in San Francisco.

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