

No Exit at Drinko Hall, Cleveland State University (April 20)

by Daniel Hathaway



No Exit's third performance of its 2015 spring program on Monday, April 20 at Cleveland State University's Drinko Recital Hall included a wide range of contemporary sounds and video, ranging from an almost elderly work (dating from 1994) to the first performances of newly-minted pieces. The emphasis was on electronic music, either all by itself or in combination with live performance, and there wasn't a boring moment.

Andy Akiho's *21* required cellist Nicholas Diodore and marimbist Luke Rinderknecht to multi-task. In addition to playing cello with his hands, Diodore was busy with an electronic loop pedal as well as a kick drum, while Rinderknecht's foot operated a tambourine. Akiho's program note said the piece is "rooted in traditional Trinidadian Soca rhythms" and its sequence of notes is based on the chords in the 21st bar of the fugue in J.S. Bach's *Violin Sonata No. 1 in g*, BWV 1001.



On first hearing, those connections weren't obvious, but the two musicians dispatched their parts with flair and confidence.

Eric M.C. Gonzalez's *A Concise Autobiography of Clarence Leone* was the first premiere on Monday's program. A pre-recorded audio work narrated by Ray Caspio, the

autobiography is that of a fictional character who “is the CEO and co-founder of Caffsys Inc., one of the leading personal computer hardware/software manufacturers on the planet,” according to Gonzalez’s program note, which went on to cite Leone’s contributions to the industry in faux-corporate speak. It was amusing, but I didn’t quite get the point.

Pure music returned to the stage with Christopher Goddard’s 2013 duo for violin and viola entitled *And Chase*, an engaging work that did exactly what the program note said it would do: “It features two similar, but entirely different, instruments: the quick, agile violin and its pursuer, the slightly bulkier — yet stronger — viola. Throughout the piece’s three distinct sections, the chase gradually weaves its way up the instrumental register as the subjects steadily approach one another. In the end, it’s a dead heat...”

Violinist Cara Tweed and violist James Rhodes made that chase into a gripping drama, playing both urgently and with beautiful, contrasting tone. Each played from a set of four music stands that, altogether, formed a V-shape pointing at the audience. It was ironic, given the narrative of the piece, that Tweed moved toward the audience, while Rhodes moved upstage during the course of the piece. It would have been fun if the violist had arranged his pages backwards so the two musicians would start upstage and meet each other at the apex of the V at the end.

Montreal-based composer Christopher Stark’s *Two-Handed Storytelling*, written in 2012, brought pianist Nicholas Underhill into a conversation with a laptop computer, whose screen displayed large cue numbers as the piece went along. Seeking to contribute “something fresh” to the piano repertoire, Stark said in his notes that he decided to “fictionalize the non-fictional piano techniques” (whatever that means), by telling a story whose characters are developed “through a series of episodes.”

After a false start because an untidy pile of music sheets was out of order, Underhill joined the electronic sounds in an eventful narrative in which the piano seemed to gain a clear advantage.

Four works followed intermission. A large screen descended and lights dimmed for Greg D’Alessio’s video piece, *To Cleave, and to Cleave not*. This was the second premiere of the evening, though D’Alessio’s cryptic program notes hinted that if it accomplished its goal of “involving both the concept of opposites, as well as the concept of Cleveland...it is also likely that it will become part of a larger work which may come into being, probably titled ‘Cleveland-land,’ but at the time of this writing, this is all speculation.”

Not much to go on there, but the “collage of sounds and images” revolved around word-play on the name of the city’s founding father, Moses Cleaveland, who left, never to

return, but whose name stuck — even if misspelled. The flow of images and music was expertly edited and fun to watch, whatever D’Alessio ultimately has in mind.

Artistic director Timothy Beyer’s *Afflictions*, dating from 2010, sets the emotions associated with five human disorders to intentionally discomforting music for solo cello. Nicholas Diodore made his way from “Atrophy” to “Insomnolence,” by way of “Inflammation,” “Lesions,” and “Paresthesia” in a performance as gripping as its subjects were unpleasant.

James Praznik’s *Exo-Narrative 1: Thanks for the Memories* was the third premiere on Monday. “Few elements can make a piece of music more relatable and emotive as the human voice,” Praznik wrote in his notes, indicating that in this piece “the character desperately wants his voice to connect with the audience, citing phrases used commonly in conversation. The specifics of the narrative will likely remain unclear...”

Unclear indeed, for the fragments of speech that emerged from the large speakers onstage during this totally pre-recorded piece were largely indecipherable due to Drinko’s bright acoustic.

The elder statesman on Monday’s concert was Edmund Campion, whose 1994 work for vibraphone and electronics, *Losing Touch*, brought Luke Rinderknecht back to the stage, and the concert to a conclusion. Here’s Campion, explaining the work in a program note:

The human performer in *Losing Touch* begins the relationship with the electronic world in a naïve spirit, a spirit of human cooperation. As the piece nears its end, the electronics push beyond the limits of human performance. Ultimately, the live soloist, being robbed of the more expressive aspects of performance, “loses touch.” By the end, the machine and human occupy different worlds, and the illusion of cooperation is shattered.

Rinderknecht communicated with the computer via headphones that sent him coordination cues — a detail that seemed to go against the narrative of the piece, since the computer was actually “in touch” with the performer all along. Nonetheless, the dialogue was interesting, even if once again the live performer seemed to win out in the end.

As always, in addition to its expert performances, No Exit provided its audience with a beautifully-designed, glossy program book. And a few puzzling pieces to think about on the way home.

Photo: Luke Rinderknecht and electronics at Spaces, April 18.

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