

No Exit: “Sonic Landscapes” at Heights Arts (Oct. 8)

by Mike Telin



For their latest series of concerts, the first-rate new music ensemble No Exit presented “Sonic Landscapes,” a program of six appealing works that explored the variety of ways composers use timbre, texture, and rhythm to create vivid imagery with sound. I was part of the capacity audience who attended the October 8 performance at Heights Arts.

Short, jabbing rhythmic patterns interjected into long melodic lines are the defining features of Danish composer Per Nørgård’s *Spell* (1973), which opened the concert. Like a trio of chameleons, clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe, cellist Nicholas Diodore, and pianist Nicholas Underhill deftly changed musical colors with each of the work’s short motifs.

The mark of a great composer of miniatures is the ability to create a complete musical arc within a three- to four-minute period, and the late Stephen Paulus knew exactly how to do that. Performing three movements from his *Seven Miniatures* (1989), Diodore, violinist Cara Tweed, and violist James Rhodes nimbly brought the jazzy “Caprice,” to life. The Trio evoked the stark, cold Nordic winter during “Lament,” and tossed off the quicksilver lines of the ending “Toccata” with flair.

The evening included three world premieres, the first of which was Cleveland State University faculty composer Greg D’Alessio’s *Secret Lives of Birds* (2016),

for solo flutes and electronics. The work is beautifully constructed and inventively interweaves recorded bird songs and lyrical flute passages with live acoustic melodies. Performing on c and alto flutes, Sean Gabriel, for whom the piece was written, brought a graceful warmth to the alluring writing. A nice aspect of the piece is D'Alessio's resistance to using a barrage of extended techniques in his flute writing, only a few flutter tongues are added here and there for ornamentation, allowing the listener to bask in the serenity of the music.

Born in Taiwan in 1995, Yuan-Keng Ling is currently studying composition at Brandeis University. A very brief, lighthearted work, *Out of...//* (2016), is centered around a single musical gesture with humorous riffs exchanged between the instruments around it. Here, percussionist Luke Rinderknecht joined Hirthe, Rhodes, and Underhill in a performance that articulated all that the music had to say.

The third premiere was Malaysian-born Hong-Da Chin's *Perpetuity* (2016) for solo bass clarinet. Commissioned and performed by Gunnar Owen Hirthe, the work utilizes the entire range of the instrument, including some arresting harmonics in the high register. Throughout, Hirthe repeatedly demonstrated his technical prowess, as well as his stunning breath control. But in the end, *Perpetuity* indeed like something that was lasting forever.

Except for a slow "Americana-sounding" middle section, Jefferson Friedman's *78* (2006), is ten minutes' worth of rhythmic pulsating sound that creates the illusion of two trains on a fast track to collision. Friedman's imaginative inclusion of blues chords, syncopations, and constant modulating harmonies keep the hyper-active work exciting. Rinderknecht led Gabriel, Hirthe, Tweed, Diodore, and Underhill in an impressive display of pin-point precision, bringing the evening to a wonderful conclusion.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 3, 2016.

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