

## Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble at Gartner Auditorium, CMA (Nov. 5)

by Daniel Hathaway



After a year's hiatus, Timothy Weiss and his Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble returned to Gartner Auditorium on Saturday afternoon, November 5, for the first of four performances this season. Literary texts and visual imagery gave the audience engaging handles

on works by Oberlin faculty composers Elizabeth Ogonek and Stephen Hartke and Scottish composer James MacMillan.

According to the composer's notes, Ogonek's *Lightenings*, completed this year, had several inspirations: a dozen poems by Seamus Heaney that explore "the relationship between ordinary, everyday life and transcendence;" a set of line drawings by Sol LeWitt based on a larger collection of Heaney poems; and the late third- or early fourth-century Christian hymn *Phos hilaron* sung at the lighting of lamps in the evening. The latter ties in with Heaney's line about "A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares / With pure exhilaration before death."

Scored for clarinet (Silvio Guitian), violin (John Kirchenbauer), piano (Natasha Gwirceman), and a variety of percussion instruments (Justin Gunter), *Lightenings* was commissioned by the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, where it was premiered last July. Its twelve movements — sonically concentrated in high registers and underlined by liturgical-sounding percussion — visit a whole catalogue of interesting, sometimes unearthly sounds and timbres. The piece received a shimmering performance, with lyrical interchanges between clarinet and violin, a huge piano crescendo, and arresting solos by tom-toms and mallets. The composer was present to take a bow.

As Stephen Hartke explained to the audience, his *Willow Run* is named after what was once the world's largest building under a single roof, a World War II bomber factory near Detroit designed by Albert Kahn. Hartke wryly noted that the famous industrial architect "had designed buildings that, as a Jew, he was not allowed to enter — like the Athletic Club of Detroit." Before the factory was demolished in 2013, Kahn's granddaughter Ernestine Ruben documented Willow Run in hundreds of photographs. Hartke selected 21 of those images to inspire a work that will eventually become the score for a documentary film.

After showing projections of Ruben's images, Hartke yielded the stage to Weiss, CME, and guest alto and baritone saxophonist Noah Getz for the Cleveland premiere of *Willow Run*. Getz, an Oberlin graduate, played a central role in the piece, capturing the loneliness of the deserted building in several expressive cadenzas, and taming the often assertive sound of the baritone sax just enough to fit into the sonic window of the ensemble.

Getz and his colleagues — Tanavi Prabhu (English horn), Silvio Guitian (clarinet), Wyeth Aleksei (flugelhorn), Ina McCormack (harp), Stephen Feld and Robert Earle (double basses), and Justin Gunter, Kelsey Bannon, and Carson Fratus (percussion) — contributed eerie textures, big unisons, and outbursts of mallet percussion to the narrative.

The last work was relatively ancient, dating from 1990, when James MacMillan wrote *...as others see us...* for a concert by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at the National Portrait Gallery in London. The suite is based on paintings in wildly different styles depicting King Henry VIII, court poet John Wilmot, John Churchill (the Duke of Marlborough), the poets George Byron, William Wordsworth, and T.S. Eliot, and scientist Dorothy Hodgkin. While seeking to analyze the individual character of each of his historical subjects, MacMillan also gives the piece some continuity by linking the six movements with various transformations of an old Scottish dance tune.

Amanda Dame (flute and piccolo), Shelly Li (bassoon and contrabassoon), Corey Worley (viola), and Jeremy Kreutz (cello) joined previously-heard performers Guitian, Aleksei, Gunter, Kirchenbauer, and Earle in this intriguing piece. Conductor Timothy Weiss promised the audience that the paintings would be projected, but only after we had heard each musical portrait — taking a tack that fueled the imagination and honed in the ear.

Two movements stick in the memory: the crazed Renaissance march that accompanies Hans Holbein the Younger's painting of Henry VIII (in which the tune *Greensleeves* made a slightly chilling appearance), and the odd combination of High Anglican music

and American jazz that represents Eliot's bifurcated personality (further expressed in Patrick Heron's cubist portrait). MacMillan's sometimes representational, sometimes abstract music is amusing and penetrating in its insights. Weiss and CME gave ...*as others see us*... a confident, committed performance.

CME returns to Gartner Auditorium on Sunday, December 4 at 2:00 pm, when Weiss will conduct the ensemble in Jacob Druckman's *Counterpoise*, Judith Weir's *Piano Concerto* with Oberlin faculty soloist Haewon Song, and Augusta Read Thomas's *Selene (Moon Chariot Rituals)*.

*Photo: Weiss and CME in Chicago on Oberlin Conservatory's 150th anniversary tour in January, 2016.*

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