No Exit at SPACES Gallery (Sept. 30)

by Mike Telin

The inventive new music ensemble No Exit launched their ninth concert season with three identical concerts featuring world premieres by Ohio composers. I attended the September 30 performance at the acoustically pleasing SPACES Gallery. The evening was defined by works that creatively explored the use of layered rhythms, ranging from the violent to the enchanting, that were deftly performed by the seven-member ensemble.

The first premiere was Michael Rene Torres' *...his existence a flux...* (2017). Inspired by an excerpt from philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius' book *Meditations*, the work opens with long-ringing notes in the glockenspiel, later joined by the piano, that transform into slow-pulsating tones as players are added. The mesmerizing chords grow in volume as they are interrupted by loud instrumental shrieks from the ensemble. Long chords return, fluctuating syncopations in the piano and glockenspiel meditatively floating above. Flutist Sean Gabriel, clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe, violinist Cara Tweed, cellist Nicholas Diodore, pianist Nicholas Underhill, and percussionist Luke Rinderknecht performed expertly, bringing the work's inner turmoil to life.

Tweed and Diodore were joined by violist James Rhodes for premiere number two, Nasim Khorassani's *Growth* (2017). The work depicts the story of a musical cell formed by the tones B, C, D, and E-flat which gradually grows over nine minutes. Trills, sharp accents, and subtle waves of sound that reflect the young composer's Iranian roots are skillfully woven together, creating a hazy color palette. The performers, cued by Hirthe, played with poise.

The full ensemble was onstage for the evening's final premiere, Matthew Ivic's *Septet* (2017). During the eleven-minute work, Ivic uses tone clusters that slowly unfold — compact music becomes fragmented and fragmented music becomes unified. Opening

with long chords punctuated by a snare drum roll and woodblock, a virtuosic wailing clarinet line leads into a soft march section. This music ebbs and flows in style between neo-classical and Americana, as the instruments exchange solo passages. Eventually the beguiling theme builds into a full-blown march which is suddenly halted by booming stomps in the percussion. Long chords emerge as triangle taps bring everything to a tranquil conclusion. The enjoyable piece was given an excellent performance that captured both the menacing and calming nature of the work.

Alexsander G. Brusentev's *In Mourning*, for solo flute, provided the perfect platform for Sean Gabriel to show his prowess in performing extended techniques — the un-barred, introspective work contains roughly fifteen of them. The gripping piece is a solemn meditation, perhaps about a deceased pet, that is rudely interrupted by poltergeists — sultry straight-tone melodic passages countered by whistle tones, flutter tonguing, key slaps, and humming. Gabriel understands how to convey this music to the audience, which he held in rapt attention from beginning to end.

Clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe possesses a phenomenal technique and a natural ability to make the thorniest passages sound easy. Both qualities were evident during his riveting playing of Eric Mandat's *Tricolor Capers*. A clarinetist himself, Mandat is known for composing experimental works for the instrument. *Capers*, a three-movement work played without pause, is filled with multiphonics and fast leaps from the lowest to highest register, with just enough chromaticism to keep it interesting. Hirthe's dark, woody sound was ominous during the opening "Portent," his soft passages brutally interrupted by loud wails. Simple oscillating motives build during "Sway," and gradually move into the wild, exciting "Bop."

What made the evening so attractive was the variety of styles and the compactness of each work. Nothing was longer than eleven minutes.

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