

NEOSonicFest: No Exit at Heights Arts (April 6)

by David Kulma



This year's NEOSonicFest — the new music festival presented by the Cleveland Chamber Symphony — held its second concert on Friday, April 6th with a program by the venturesome ensemble No Exit at Heights Arts. The musicians of No Exit and two guest trumpeters were in top form for this potpourri of chamber music.

Pianist Nicholas Underhill opened with Leo Orstein's *Wild Men's Dance*, a playfully subversive shock of a piece from 1913 — just add a Stravinsky-like melody for a delightful percussive romp. In this carefully calibrated performance, Underhill formed different shapes with his hands to coax and pound multiple adjacent keys at the same time. It was cluster heaven in every register of the piano.

Next, violinist Cara Tweed, violist James Rhodes, and cellist Nicholas Diodore played a No Exit commission from 2011 with authoritative, virtuosic ownership. Cleveland-based composer Ty Emerson's *Tripartite* showcases disjunct expressionist melodies jumping across strings and fingerboards. In the first movement, Diodore plucked and strummed as Tweed and Rhodes passed and overlapped their hothouse melodies. In the second movement, they attacked thick, dissonant chords and later swam into a spinning soup, each player obsessing over their own short idea. The final movement's phantasmagoria of grinding, repeated drones and tremolos amid high, whistling harmonics was outlined by imperative chugga-chuggas that gave Emerson's ideas structure.

Percussionist Luke Rinderknecht calmed everything down with the meditative third movement from Danish composer Per Nørgård's 1982 *I Ching*. Titled "The Gentle, The

Penetrating,” it featured Rinderknecht plunking bright, calm melodic patterns on a kalimba, and flicking two temple bowls to mark time, all of them sitting atop a *timpano* for resonance. As the music gained intensity, Rinderknecht stamped his left foot with its jingle-strapped ankle to create a lovely beat. This joyful and sweet music beautifully set up intermission.

Guest trumpeters Scott McKee and Jack Sutte were featured in two works. Andrew Rindfleisch’s *Four Fanfares for Two Trumpets* (2011) includes buzzy hocketing around the same few notes, elaborations around a single tone, busy vampings that slowly ascended, and slow counterpoint uncomfortably settling on a close dissonance. The piece wound to a close with the performers passing a single tone back and forth.

No Exit member James Praznik’s own *Fanfare* focuses on an ascending grace note gesture exchanged by the players. Later McKee and Sutte heralded larger intervals and ended when they reached a stable consonant octave. They played wonderfully in both works, managing to successfully blend while remaining distinct enough for listeners to follow both lines.

Tweed and clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe concluded the evening with French spectralist Tristan Murail’s *Les Ruines circulaires* from 2006. Tweed and Hirthe handled this dreamy and difficult microtonal work based on a Borges short story with ease and panache. After a crazed opening, Tweed settled into a violin solo that was slowly joined and then taken over by Hirthe. This musical ghosting — turned musical body-swapping — later went in reverse.

No Exit should be proud of this enjoyable menu of new classical music’s various streams in expert performances. On to the next tasting.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 11, 2018.

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