

Re:Sound Festival Panel Discussion at Visible Voice Books (June 10)

by David Kulma



On Sunday afternoon, June 10, at Visible Voice Books, as a part of the Re:Sound New Music Festival, co-artistic director Sophie Benn led a fascinating panel discussion featuring performers Elizabeth Baker, Will Mason, and the Popebama duo —

Erin Rogers and Dennis Sullivan. Lasting an hour, their dialogue touched on topics ranging from artistic identity and the difficulties of the musical life to the definition of “new music” itself.

How do they define themselves as artists? Baker calls herself a “new Renaissance artist” since she makes art across disciplines. Rogers depends on context: composer and instrumentalist and then goes from there. Sullivan in the end plays, writes, and teaches music. Mason is an educator first. Elaborating on teaching, Sullivan has become a better performer through working with students, while Mason emphasized the fine line between demystifying music-making for his students and allowing it to create magic

How did they find their compositional drive? Baker found it early at age four, and as an African-American woman had no role models making the music she envisioned, so she decided to write it herself. Rogers didn’t start composing until college, because she also had no living examples to emulate. Sullivan started as a doctoral student: his professor wanted to hear his own musical ideas beyond choosing sounds for others’ work. Mason reminded everyone that the artificial divisions between composer, performer, and listener are now eroding and blending together.

What is hard about a musician’s life? Baker travels so much that maintaining quality relationships and having a clear sense of home are difficult. Sullivan — along with Mason and Baker — dislike schlepping gear. Rogers is grateful for the creative life, but knows how difficult it is to build a reputation and professional relationships. Mason

tackles financial questions directly with his students: the goal is to not lose money. Baker follows a different model: have a baseline fee with exceptions for a few specific goodwill projects. Mason's stable university teaching gives him freedom to avoid playing music he dislikes, while Baker said that musicians can't devalue their work, because a low financial bar means no one will make a living.

How do they define "new music"? Mason considers himself a jazz drummer and "new music advocate." Maybe a better term based on this festival would be "experimental music" in a literal sense of exploring and creating new sounds. Sullivan focused on describing the music he likes to hear and make — interesting, dissonant, crunchy, and aggressive. Rogers said that although the music can sound wildly different, the wonderful thing about the community is that its practitioners are its audience, creating an active environment where people take inspiration from one another.

Audience member Arlene Dunn gave a listener's perspective: "new music" is about trying new things, taking risks, and listening to everyday sounds with new ears in the spirit of John Cage. Baker thinks the term is problematic. She wants to focus on the next things rather than to deify previous generations. The community of "new music" has a new term waiting, but just hasn't found it yet.

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