

No Exit with Patchwork at SPACES (Dec. 14)

by Nicholas Stevens



Music fans tend to look back fondly on the moments when love took root. Rarer, and less often commented on, are the occasions when a concert or first listen sticks in the mind because it rekindles, rather than sparks, a passion for a particular style, genre, or format. For lovers of fresh, provocative, enchanting new chamber music, No

Exit new music ensemble's December 14 performance with Patchwork at SPACES offered a reintroduction to the fundamental appeal of the art and its scene. Listeners heard eleven expert performers render five world premieres, all within the bright intimacy of four art-lined gallery walls.

Directness of expression reigned throughout the evening, starting with the cozy oval of seats: performers on one side, audience opposite. Assistant director James Praznik jolted listeners to attention with *Screaming Songs*, his own composition. Designed to "wring vocal expressions" from all-instrumental forces, the piece succeeded: saxophonist Noa Even and bass clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe achieved humanlike sounds. However, even non-wind players, such as cellist Nicholas Diodore and drummer Stephen Klunk, stretched known techniques in pursuit of the quasi-vocal. Some music calls attention to its own artifice with its clear sections and melodic play. Not this piece, which felt organic and alive, voicing its own growing pains.

Ty Emerson's *Darkling, I Listen*, inspired by Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, resembled a single painted brushstroke on an otherwise blank canvas. Variable in thickness, color, and height, drawn against silence and always threatening to run out, the line of sound appeared most fragile when Nicholas Underhill's piano and David Luidens's glockenspiel splattered above. Hong-Da Chin's *...the arc of a tear...* zoomed in on the titular gesture of sorrow and replayed it over and over, from a new angle each time. The opposite of Praznik's piece, it makes both local and long-term processes plainly audible. In concert, it proved absorbing and, at moments, shocking.



Although many readers might choose *Screaming Songs* as a soundtrack for their daily news consumption, they might consider Colin Holter's smart, striking *Pallor* instead. A reflection on everyday social realities that gradually grow too grating to ignore — such as traditional notions of white identity in the U.S., “increasingly and troublingly loud” in Holter's self-aware phrasing — the piece asks audiences for patience. After several minutes' worth of periodic *shh* sounds from a laptop that underpin calm, interlocking woodwind lines, one wonders: is this getting *louder*? The question felt like a distant memory by the time the performance reached its raucous climax, complete with the rubbing and beating of a snare drum head with a brick of Styrofoam. By the end, one truly does question how we all got to this point, musically as well as politically, without noticing.

No Exit artistic director Timothy Beyer's *She Was My Only Child* shares its name and mood with a painting by Louise Pershing, which depicts a black-clad figure leaving a blood-red church as a small, ghostly form lingers behind. Bringing all of the players together to cap the concert, the piece also tied the program to the setting in a subtle but effective fashion. Flutist Sean Gabriel pulled a sort of teakettle wail from the headjoint of his instrument as textures shifted, and the excellent upper strings — violinist Cara Tweed and violist James Rhodes — created the sonic equivalent of a halo, or perhaps a

more threatening aura. Later, Hirthe generated tones that sounded like the authentic vocalizations of a spirit, gurgling unintelligibly from the other side.

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