

No Exit: Gabriel & Pongracz at Appletree Books (June 21)

by Rory O'Donoghue



Cleveland's preeminent new and avant-garde music ensemble, No Exit, returned to Appletree Books in Cleveland Heights for another intimate evening of chamber music on Friday, June 21. Flutist Sean Gabriel performed three solo works and was joined by percussionist Andrew Pongracz for two pieces for flute and marimba.

First up was Victoria Bond's *Shenblu*, a portmanteau title that evokes both the Shenandoah River and the Blue Ridge Mountains. *Flute Talk* magazine observes that *Shenblu* is built on a pentatonic scale, and that its success "depends upon the flutist's ability to present the changing moods from languid and expressive to intensely driving, primitive and guttural, in a multi-metered dance-like section." Although its palette of articulation was a bit bland, Gabriel teased out these sectional nuances with a keen sense of style.

"I'll start again," Gabriel said with a grin after a passing ambulance disrupted the beginning of his next selection, Betsy Jolas' *Episode 1*. In the oldest piece on the program, Jolas instructs the performer to follow three different methods of measuring space and time throughout the work: metronomically with a tempo marking, sections to be completed within a certain timespan, and phrases that require precisely one breath. Gabriel went to great lengths to tease out Jolas' quizzical musical content, at times melodic and at others abruptly punctuated. He handled the tricky music with a broad sense of line.

Gabriel invited Pongracz to the stage for Peter Tanner's *Diversions for Flute and Marimba*, a lively six-movement work from a rather obscure composer. "He's still alive — well, we can't prove he's dead," Pongracz said beforehand. "We don't know much

about him.” The two explored Tanner’s movements with flair and wit, sparkling in the more virtuosic sections. The tenor voice of the marimba added much-needed depth to the evening’s aural spectrum. Pongracz lent fiery technique to the March and the Finale, rocketing through difficult passages.

Gabriel went solo again with Augusta Read Thomas’ *Karumi*, which he said means “lightness of touch” in Japanese. The piece featured long melodic lines with interjecting articulations in a manner that recalled the Jolas. Pongracz joined the flutist for the closer, Howard J. Buss’ *Stellar Visions*, which explores many different sonic realms with enjoyable momentum. The two managed the wonderful juxtaposition between the puckish, skittering marimba and long, rhapsodic flute, and blended seamlessly in a number of entrances and exits. The piece worked up into a fun groove, a fresh-sounding ending to a varied evening.

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