

No Exit at SPACES (Sept. 6)

by Nicholas Stevens



Any concert program that begins with music of mutual hostility and ends with a lament may seem too reminiscent of the news cycle in 2019. Add to that a composition about species diversity, and the picture darkens further. However, No Exit's season opener at SPACES felt more like a refuge from the fights and frights of everyday life, or at least a guide to bearing them with grace and vulnerability. In a program of diverse music, Cleveland's contemporary-classical powerhouse proved itself capable of anything, and unafraid to take risks.

The concert on Friday, September 6 found audience members seated near the entrance and the musicians set up where a hallway opens into a larger gallery space — unusual for this venue but necessary due to an installation, and mostly unproblematic for sight and sound. Artistic director Timothy Beyer greeted listeners with characteristic good cheer. No Exit proves itself in performance, with no excessive solemnity required.

Pianist [Nick Underhill](#) wrote *Passing Lane*, here given its world premiere with the composer at the keyboard and James Rhodes on viola, as a “road rage toccata,” premised



on a destructive interaction between duet partners. From the start, the two strayed into one another’s musical territory, with results that suggested fury without veering into gratuitous pounding. Rhodes sounded unhinged in the aggressive moments, but sweet during a “rest stop.” Underhill likewise careened most of the time, but also waxed contemplative. The ending, too good to spoil, involves a pencil and the viola’s strings.

Adonai Henderson, a composer studying at Cleveland State University, drew inspiration from

Africa and its diasporic legacies in writing *ngoma*, a solo percussion piece busy enough to simulate a whole ensemble. Luke Rinderknecht tapped and hammered at a set of conga drums, thwacking rims for emphasis. It’s a testament to both Henderson’s and Rinderknecht’s sharp senses of pacing that the interlocking patterns of the opening led to the explosive climax with simmering inexorability.

A symbolic “cage” of music stands surrounded clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe in Philip Blackburn’s *Air*, forcing him to rotate from one to the next. The avian metaphor emerges from Baroque movement types, such as those named in the piece’s three movements: *Air*, *Canary*, and *Ground*. The first featured Hirthe alone, musically leaping but calm. Later, Underhill entered with left-hand rumbling that grew into sharp stabs. In the final movement, high pitches for the clarinet became



overwhelming to hear — a consequence both of Blackburn’s edgy, maximum-volume writing and the acoustic of the hallway space.

Sean Parks, another Cleveland State composition student, contributed *Species Plantarum, Liber II*, named for a 1753 botanical treatise. The first movement, inspired by a Tanzanian herb, moves in blips and oozes. The second, titled after a woody shrub, conjures the plant's texture through the rasp of brushes on a snare drum. The third began with a lovely duet for violinist Cara Tweed and cellist Nick Diodore, interrupted by insistent cries from Sean Gabriel's piccolo. The piece's most ear-catching textures come in the fourth, which incorporates switched-on vibraphone, alto flute, and cello, with some well-timed tongue slaps for clarinet. The fifth and longest movement echoed the literal opening-out of the performance space into the gallery behind.



The concert ended with two pieces featuring percussionist Chester Englander, whose expertise lies with the [cimbalom](#). Englander's soft skitters and sudden accents conversed with Diodore's swirling figures in Kati Agócs's *Saint Elizabeth Bells*. A tribute to the composer's father inspired by the church bells he heard on his deathbed, the piece cites familiar hourly chimes only once, but to wrenching effect.

Englander returned for a solo encore, the final movement of György Kurtág's *Splinters*. Blossoming into knotty chords, Englander's stutters and strokes showcased the almost magical capabilities of the seldom-heard instrument, which, in a city as influenced by Eastern European cultures as Cleveland, could well find more of a foothold here. Let's hope so.

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