

No Exit: Electronica at Appletree Books (Oct. 18)

by David Kulma



There is something odd about only looking at audio speakers during a concert of experimental electronic music. How do you humanize such an experience? The thoughtful musicians of No Exit delightfully answered this question in an engaging and

interactive concert at Appletree Books on Friday, October 18.

Over ten years, Artistic Director Timothy Beyer and friends have slowly cultivated an adventurous audience. The fact that they filled the seats on Friday with people who want to explore avant-garde music making, and who participate in the conversation between pieces even at a concert without an ensemble present, shows how successful No Exit has been in filling a musical need in Cleveland.

One helpful through-line for this “disembodied” performance was that each composer took the spoken word as their starting point, and then built audio collages from that.

Berio’s 1958 *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* creates music out of mezzo-soprano Cathy Barbarian’s reading of a section from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Berio took apart that recorded speech and focused on individual phonemes, which on Friday flew across the sound space mixed with high-pitched chirping, resonant jumbles, and bouncing splices. Every so often a single word appears out of the mass, like “listen,” and then the first syllable is stretched into an extended, serpentine sibilant.

Associate Director James Praznik spoke about his 2015 work *Exo-Narrative No. 1: “Thanks for the Memories,”* describing a moment when his first listener changed the direction of the piece. The crazed opening had an aggressive sadness the composer hadn’t considered, so he decided to fill out the 4-½ minutes by emphasizing loneliness.

The result is the aural equivalent of the “shaky cam” technique in recent violent action movies. Sliding siren-like sounds and sudden high-volume spasms were mixed with words that were difficult to comprehend. Amidst some calmer shimmering and framing breaths, the overall emotion was captivantly disturbed.

Greg D’Alessio’s untitled work specifically written for this concert was based on his 2018 piece for No Exit: *Many Doors*. Mixing recorded sounds of ensemble members’ instruments with audio from productions of Jean-Paul Sartre’s eponymous play in both French and English, the composer described it afterwards as an “existential, hellish dance party.” Framed by repetitions of a woman saying “*toujours*,” the music builds clear drum grooves as melodic chunks and instrumental solos dance with excerpts from the play. The result is an oddball comedy mixed with angst in the best Sartrean tradition.

Beyer’s *Dissent* is a political work from 2006 that asks the question: “What shall be the end of these things?” Built from old preaching records made by some of America’s most notorious bigots and religious charlatans, Beyer’s piece piles up layer upon layer of fanatical pronouncements starting with the most innocuous and ending with horrid, paranoid diatribes. Low sweeps and voluminous knife swipes further place the excerpts in ironic quotation marks. The metallic screeching derived from these ramblings made clear Beyer’s own feelings about his noxious muses in this work.

The evening ended with a preview of an upcoming Praznik work for the No Exit ensemble. Built from many layers and constantly moving from calm to explosive extremes, the piece whetted the audience’s appetite with an exciting, vertigo-inducing chunk from its electronic backdrop.

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