

A long-awaited celebration from the Blue Streak Ensemble (May 22)

by Stephanie Manning



In the two years since the Cleveland Institute of Music's centennial, Margaret Brouwer's Blue Streak Ensemble has been patiently waiting for the opportunity to celebrate — and they weren't about to let another chance pass by. After three pandemic-related delays, the concert finally presented on May 22 at CIM's Mixon Hall was a testament to both the institution and the resilience of the ensemble itself.

Sunday's program, the first in a pair of performances from the ensemble, featured four contemporary works with instrumentations ranging from one to six players. It also paid homage to the lineage of CIM composition faculty with a work by Donald Erb — the second performance, on Tuesday the 24th, highlighted Marcel Dick and Keith Fitch. (Brouwer herself was the head of the composition department from 1996 to 2008.)

Fittingly, Erb's solo clarinet piece *Woody* turned out to be the standout of the evening. A collection of small fragments in a jazzy style, the piece was inspired by the clarinet playing of Woody Herman and Richard Stolzman, and Alex Abreu gave the four movements plenty of energy. His technical dexterity served him well during the work's most demanding moments, from rapid high register trills to ascending passages that push the instrument to the limit.

In contrast with Erb's quest to reference specific performers, Jennifer Higdon's *Piano Trio* took a more abstract approach. The two movements, "Pale Yellow" and "Fiery Red," evoked their respective colors by experimenting with timbre, tempo, and key. The airy, wistful yellow, accentuated by the pale beauty of the violin's high register, was the antithesis of the forceful, staccato red, which was dotted with energetic pizzicatos.

Pianist Arseniy Gusev, violinist James Thompson, and cellist Robert Nicholson each brought a high level of individual focus to their parts, though the trio could have benefited from a little more group communication — more eye contact and visual cues would likely have made the piece flow more naturally.

More group cohesion would also have benefited the rest of the program, though the two larger pieces found a focal point in conductor Dean Buck. The musicians from the Higdon, plus Abreu, were joined by flutist Mary Kay Fink and percussionist Luke Rinderknecht for Derek Bermel's *Tied Shifts* and Melinda Wagner's *Unsung Chordata*. Both works require precise, confident conducting, which Buck had in spades.

That rhythmic control was especially important in the Bermel, a piece packed full of tied rhythms that purposefully obscure the musical pulse. Bermel divides the ensemble into separate sonic worlds — the strings and piano as the driving pulse, and the winds as instruments of effect. Throughout, the unison passages felt very together, and the constant interjection of new textures in the percussion was executed cleanly and confidently by Rinderknecht.

Unsung Chordata, the best example of the group's ensemble prowess, boasted an orchestration that was particularly suited for the space. Mixon Hall's favored treatment of higher sounds had often confined the low tones of cello and clarinet to the background, but here, the presence of more individual and exposed parts played to the group's strengths. The Blue Streak Ensemble is clearly full of talent, and Melinda Wagner's piece was just what they needed to show it off.

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