

## Re:Sound New and Experimental Music Festival (June 11)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The Cleveland Uncommon Sound Project hosted its annual Re:Sound New and Experimental Music Festival June 8-11 at various Cleveland venues. I was lucky enough to catch the final two performances on Sunday afternoon at the Convivium 33 Art Gallery.

Pakistani-born Zeerak Ahmed, who performs under the name SLOWSPIN, and trumpeter Theresa May each held the audience in thrall in programs of live music interacting with pre-recorded sounds.

Ahmed's music is mesmerizing. She sings with devotional yearning, eyes closed, left arm raised, and in perpetual movement, dancing out meanings of the words. Her songs are in English but also Urdu, Farsi, and Purbi. Whether or not words are understood, deeply felt emotion always cuts through.

The music's two abiding themes are longing and wandering — longing of the lover, and the immigrant's search for a remembered homeland. Ahmed also identifies with ancestors who have wandered for centuries in search of the divine.

Everything performed on Sunday was taken from Ahmed's first full-length album, *Talisman*, released last month. Vocal sound sculptures and installations, created on

equipment right in front of us, suggested Hindustani classical music traditions. Other tracks evoked a more modern flavor, aided by folk-tinged flutes and guitars.

Ahmed reiterated on Sunday what she has said previously about the album: that it has songs that belong to lyrical and poetic traditions 700 years old or more, but “there’s also so much of my own writing there as well.” Sadly, Ahmed will soon be leaving Cleveland to further her career in New York. The immigrant’s journey continues.



Cleveland-born trumpeter Theresa May is inclined to push musical boundaries but in a way that is palatable and audience-friendly. True to her word, the music on her program was eminently listenable and fully in sync with May’s infectious playing.

Each work was prefaced by remarks from the composer, appearing in video projected onto a large screen at the back of the stage.

The title of *Commemorative Sheet in E*, by Jonathan Posthuma, is taken from the Paul Klee painting *Gedenkblatt E*, which depicts a kaleidoscopic array of mysterious signs and geometric forms — a kind of “cheat sheet” pictorializing

the creative process.

Correspondingly, the music, played live and on fixed media, seemed a demonstration of a composition being worked out in real time. Distant fanfare fragments came and went while May experimented in front of us — perhaps an in-the-moment bugler interacting with notional ones. May’s focused sound and control perfectly balanced the recorded trumpeters, giving the piece electric tension and life.

Shanyse Strickland’s *Afrofuturism*, for trumpet with electronic pedals and piano accompaniment, seemed the most personal of the three works. In her recorded remarks, the composer spoke of May’s request for a piece, and how she was first struck by the trumpeter’s hair — a work of art in itself. This got the composer to thinking about Black images and existence, and especially about the nature and persistence of Blackness in the future — thus “Afrofuturism.” Using a loop pedal, guitar pedal, and the resonance of the

piano strings, May captured Strickland's energy and suggestion of the blues. As May recited in the final bars, "Black lives will exist, Black lives will exist, Black lives will in the future!"

Eris DeJarnett's *go to the garden*, for trumpet with fixed media, begins as a calming meditation, an idyllic life. With May's trumpet warmth and golden tone, DeJarnett's gentle sound world was something to savor. Paradise soon began to darken though, as narrator Tess Galbiati turned inward, invoking the loneliness of the isolated — one of the long-lasting effects of COVID, forewarned by the composer in her remarks. But DeJarnett's music and narration reaffirmed the garden's shield of protection, and what seemed cheerless brightened again.

Stephan Haluska, whose tireless artistic planning made the Festival such a success, deserves an award, or at least the Cleveland music lover's thanks. May Re:Sound 2024 be just as thrilling.

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