

No Exit: “Surreal Games” (Oct. 14)

by Mike Telin



To celebrate their 15th anniversary No Exit has created their most ambitious project to date. Their season-long series *Surreality* encompasses a range of artistic media to present an immersive, multidisciplinary exploration of surrealism as expressed in music, art, film, poetry, literature, and performance art.

The series kicked off with “Surreal Games,” which took its inspiration from the parlor games and thought exercises employed by the Surrealists. The program featured world premieres

of musical works interspersed with poetry, as well as a corresponding art installation titled *Collaborage*, which was on view at Heights Arts. I attended the performance at SPACES on October 14.

“I want to read a poem!” Ray McNiece exclaimed. After a long silence he continued with a reading of his *Fable of the Ants*. A skilled orator, McNiece brilliantly commanded attention, setting the tone for what would follow. The evening also included a thought-provoking reading by Raja Freeman of her poem *Conspiracy* and a reading by McNiece of his *The Heart's*, which he improvised by jumping from one line here to one line there, as you could see in the printed program.

The program featured three works that were inspired by so-called Games of Variants — anonymous composers were asked to transcribe Chopin’s *Minute Waltz* without listening to it, looking at a score, or using an instrument. *Memory Piece 1* would have earned an A on a melodic and rhythmic dictation exam. *Memory Piece 2* featured an engaging, off-kilter waltz, and while *Memory Piece 3* was in 3/4 time, its resemblance to

the Chopin was nowhere to be found. Pianist Rob Kovacs performed each with a Chopinesque technical flair.



James Praznik's *Backwards Addict* was inspired by the Game of Opposites (what was forward is now backwards). Here a bowed piano, electronics, unintelligible voices, and an off-stage flute created an immersive sound cloud that was at times harmonically soothing, and at times brutal with its whoops and hollering before transitioning to a quiet moment of reflection. The dreamscape was short-lived. A menacing *Dies Irae* took control — and suddenly stopped. Violinist Cara Tweed, violist James Rhodes, cellist Nicholas Diadore, flutist Sean Gabriel, clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe, and James Praznik himself at the piano produced a sonic color palette that captivated the ears and the mind.

Adam Roberts' *End Gaze* is rooted in automatic writing, or psychography, where a person holds a writing instrument and allows the spirits to manipulate their hand. Here the full No Exit ensemble was joined by andPlay — violinist Maya Bennardo and violist Hannah Levinson — all conducted by Roberts. The work begins with long chords sliding in and out of pitch over rumbling percussion lines. Scale passages grow and decay in volume until a cacophony of sound is reached. The emotionally charged composition becomes a whisper before returning to a pleasant ear-shattering volume.

For *cherries fall*, Maya Bennardo employed the surrealist game of torn paper collage. The engaging, trance-inducing work is defined by slow-moving harmonic progressions and subtle timbral changes with instrumental voices coming in and out until dissonance is achieved. "Cherries fall where texts fail" is a surrealist proverb that brings to mind the fruit transitioning from the tree branch to the soil, and Bennardo captured that image beautifully.

Timothy Beyer turned to the paranoiac-critical method, a self-induced state of delirious paranoia to tap into the unconscious for his humorous *Dinactic Perplaxity Ritual*. His musical material: rags by Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb, George Botsford, and Nick LaRocca.

Beyer's work makes brilliant use of Ivesian techniques — think two marching bands colliding — but somehow it was easy to follow each of the well-known tunes. Imagine yourself in a fun house that turns demonic — although Chucky does not appear. Instead the work increases in tempo and volume until a sudden fade shifts to a head-exploding conclusion. If your head exploding can bring you joy, Beyer's music does.

The capacity audience was quick to offer standing applause — and this performance deserved it. They also got to take home the beautifully produced souvenir program.

Surreality continues from November 30 through December 2 with “The Unconscious,” featuring long-time No Exit collaborators Zeitgeist.

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