

She Scores: a night of musical excellence and importance (May 31)

by Max Newman



Even in the Cleveland music scene’s creatively positive atmosphere, female and non-binary composers are often underrepresented on the concert stage, and the Local 4 Music Fund’s She Scores series is looking to change this.

The series, which aims to remind us of “the urgent need to redouble our efforts toward closing the chasm of opportunity and representation that separates women from men,” was held between May 30 and June 2 at the Cleveland Institute of Music’s Mixon Hall, showcasing an impressive catalog of works that spanned a wide variety of styles and moods. I was lucky enough to attend the May 31 performance.

The striking setting went a long way in terms of adding to the experience. Curved rows of seats gently descended down to a well-lit stage, just in front of the

space’s crown jewel: a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out upon the beautiful architecture and vegetation of the CIM campus. As the evening sky darkened over the course of the concert’s two hours, the program order seemed to match it in mood, with bright, energetic, and percussive pieces towards the beginning, and more contemplative and somber works towards the conclusion.

Literally and figuratively, the concert opened with a bang. Chloe Arnold’s *...and then there were none* for percussion trio created a beautifully dissonant and nightmarish atmosphere with a stream of cacophonous bells, topped off with a variety of idiosyncratic drum sounds (including a triangle lying flat atop a snare drum) and intriguing frequencies (string bows against vibraphone tone bars). The composition was a masterclass in organized chaos — quite a feat for a composer who is still a student at Oberlin Conservatory.

Arnold's piece was one of several highlights on the night. Elizabeth Start's *Nostalgia* for flute and string trio illustrated a stunning range of musical emotion throughout its three movements. The opening movement in particular, "Rag Tag Too," was delightfully wilting, with chords folding over each other to create a haunting, sonically brilliant experience.

The closer, *Last Week's Flowers* with music and text by Annick Odom, was a stunning experimental work that was at times melancholic and at times almost surreal. Over a delicate and sweet instrumentation of percussion and bass, mezzo-soprano Kira McGirr sang heart-wrenching lyrics about longing for a lost loved one. At various points, bursts of joy came through, as McGirr described happy memories over bursts of percussive clicks.



A great aspect of the program was that every work had its own wonderful moments. Alexis Lamb's *Lyric dust* did a superb job of simulating the sounds of a rainforest through the use of percussion sextet and eerie electronics. Erin Busch's *Thirteen Ways*, for a six-piece chamber ensemble conducted by Dean Buck, pulled at the heartstrings with gorgeous, strained violin and cello stylings that perfectly complemented jazzy yet angular piano chords.

Gala Flagello's *Miss Minutes*, a percussion micro-concerto for chamber ensemble featuring Mell Csicsila as soloist and Frank Wiley as conductor, was at times endearingly whimsical, at times ominous, but always moving. *Fractal Heart: Dialogues d'amour et de la mort*, with music and text by Karen Griebing, showcased Lara Troyer's excellent soprano, especially impressive paired with pianist Megan Denman's otherworldly, dissonant accompaniment.

The biggest standout on the night was Rachelle Ryan's *Misaligned* for percussion quartet. The work featured a plethora of dazzling rhythmic patterns and a central, harrowing vibraphone melody that felt distinctly cinematic, like the soundtrack to a chilling mystery film. The use of wood blocks added to this effect, their raindrop-esque sounds providing a sense of slowly building tension. A subtle yet truly mesmerizing piece.

Based on this evening, She Scores certainly made its mark in 2024. Hopefully, more organizations will follow its lead, and strive to create a more equitable environment for composers around the globe.

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