

## She Scores: a dazzling display from composers & performers (June 2)

by Kevin McLaughlin



You might have gone to the Sunday, June 2 She Scores concert to hear exemplary works by female and nonbinary composers, or simply to enjoy some fresh new sounds. But once there, you would have stayed for the dazzling expertise on display, from both composers and performers alike.

Credit the Local 4 Music Fund and executive director Amber Rogers for organizing the fourth annual iteration of this splendid concert series, which ran from May 30-June

2 in CIM's lovely Mixon Hall. Genre or gender aside, this was an afternoon of superb music.

Margi Griebing-Haigh's *Triskaidekaphilia* ("love of the number thirteen") for three violins made for an arresting and mathematical start. Violinists Ken Johnston, Leah Goor-Burnett, and Emily Cornelius drew out the composer's introspective and playful sides in this well-crafted three-movement work. In "Chiasmus" — Greek for a kind of rhetorical palindrome — the central motive moves forward and back as it should. In "Apostrophe," players teetered in an off-kilter waltz (thirteen beats long, naturally). And in "Aristeia" ("highest glory in battle"), players parried percussive pizzicatos and Bartók-inspired rhythms and modes.

Marina López's *Folia*, for flute, bass clarinet, violin, viola, and cello, is a clever and infectious combination of old music and new — the Renaissance chord progression meeting rhythmic and melodic features of hip hop and freestyle rap. Against the ground bass of Jeffrey Singler's cello, bass clarinetist Stanislav Golovin established widely

spaced, syncopated rhythms, compelling the rest of the ensemble to imitate his groove. A plainer, church choir-like variation of the ground presents a contrast with its virtuous quarter-notes before the groove-possessed bass clarinet resumes its moves to debauch the band for good.

The reedy, blended beauty of saxophone quartet, in a language and palette reminiscent of Percy Grainger, carved out a special sonic space in Cara Haxo's *Recurrences*. With their lovely playing, soprano Perry Roth, alto Tyler Young, tenor Drew Hosler, and baritone Gabriel Piqué served as Haxo's allies in recasting Shel Silverstein's beloved 1964 picture book, *The Giving Tree*. A once-upon-a-time pastorale introduces the tale, and lyrical themes — always in triple meter for the tree, and playful, noble, and aggressive for the boy — recount it. Blues and chromaticism also help to convey the book's not always nature-friendly allegory.

Eunji Lee's *Network*, scored for soprano, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, violin, and double bass, takes its inspiration and title from “the unique characteristics of networks,” with their ability to deliver information, establish close connections, and evolve over time. Soprano Lara Troyer contributed wordless vocal acrobatics, her utterances becoming increasingly rapid and complex. Conductor Frank Wiley was the faultless source of a steady beat and impeccable direction.

Jeffrey Singler was a model of poise and precision as protagonist in Siyuan Kang's *I See the Wind* for solo cello. The logic of using a single-line string instrument to depict wind somehow made sense in Singler's performance. Varied techniques — including harmonic glissandi, sul ponticello, and wide vibrato — helped convey a more abstract “freedom of wind” (in the composer's words), summoned by the instrumentalist and interpreted by the listener.

In her chamber work *An Eclipse of Searing Whisper* for flute, clarinet, violin, and cello, Yi Yao seems to deconstruct rather than construct music, in the conventional sense. The composer's imagination fairly crackles with every passing measure. In the absence of conventional melody and harmony, each instrument adds to a canvas of extended techniques and textures — microtones, whistles, breathing sounds, unusual bowing techniques, and more — for an atmosphere rich in life-force and mystery.

While there are no real soloists in Yi Yao's piece, when Mary Kay Robinson began to whisper (searingly!) lines of text into her flute, the surprise of it focused the ear, and gave the moment primary status — even if only some of these words, and little of their meaning, were discernible:

“Do you want to go for a walk? A cute little squirrel just ran into the house. I took a picture to share with you. Of course, I know you like to eat a chocolate croissant with your iced Americano.”

As Emily Laurance suggested in her insightful pre-concert remarks, “The whispered text, with its repeating trivialities, suggests there are things not being said — and that this text is a stand-in for something unspoken.”

Indigo Knecht’s chamber work *Unbroken Passion* takes its title from a line in the poem *A Stormy Sunset* by Madison Cawein (1865-1914), who was known as the “Keats of Kentucky.” The pitch collections in the work are derived from a spectral analysis of a badly out-of-tune classroom piano, and its events follow the poem’s imagery of evening storms and their aftermath.

Certain timbres suggested the layered shifting of clouds as they might appear in an evening western sky. Rob Kovacs, piano, and Dan Bruce, electric guitar, scratched their fingernails along strings to simulate the crackle of atmospheric electrical current. Drew Hosler, baritone saxophone, produced loud tongue slaps (thunder?) and subtle multiphonics (more lightning?). And Matthew Holm created other ominous sounds using a cello bow to draw metallic pitches from suspended cymbal and vibraphone. The cumulative intensity of these sounds was astonishing, striking the ear as powerfully as Varèse’s American experimentalism or 1970s free jazz and rock surely must have done upon first hearing.

Mutien Lai’s solo piano work *333 Alone* seemed to be in dialogue with the instrument’s Romantic past, demonstrating that there are still things to be said using the musical language of late Romanticism. Between Lai’s sonic palette and Randall Fusco’s performance, there may have been the works of Billy Strayhorn and Scriabin in mind.

The piece begins with a preponderance of augmented chords — imparting a sense of floating or hovering — which then descend chromatically. These inconclusive sonorities give way to major harmonies in a passionate theme using the two-against-three textures of Romantic piano literature. The passion of this moment left the listener a little wanting, though the piece may well sort itself out in a second or third performance.

Amelia Kaplan wrote *Insidious* for Pierrot ensemble plus percussion “following a toxic interpersonal experience.” After setting the work aside and returning to it later, she found that the specifics had faded but the idea of conflict and interpersonal competition remained. Kaplan describes her work as “a multiplicity of voices, each vying to be heard, with no one the winner.” Accordingly, every player had ample opportunity to show off

the sonic distinction of her or his instrument in what seemed like good-natured competition.

Mary Kay Robinson (flute) and Benjamin Chen (Bb and bass clarinets) produced glittering rhythm and color. Emily Cornelius (violin) and Robert Nicholson (cello) sailed through every extended technique assigned them. Ross Karre (vibraphone) lit up the stage during a Lionel Hampton moment toward the end, and Eric Charnofsky stood up to dampen and pluck strings inside the piano, before sitting down to tame flurries of notes. Conductor Dean Buck kept order without detracting from the work's feeling of improvisational freedom.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 10, 2024.*

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