

New works for organ take center stage at Lake Erie College (Oct. 20)

by Kevin McLaughlin



On a sun-drenched fall afternoon, Sunday, October 20, a lucky few got to hear five new organ pieces masterfully brought to life by five remarkable organists at Lake Erie College. If the music wasn't conceived for this particular organ — the Skinner opus 647 — it surely benefited from it, not to mention from the architecturally splendid setting of Helen Rockwell Morley Hall.

“New Music for Organ,” a co-presentation of the Cleveland Composers Guild and the American Guild of Organists, Cleveland Chapter, showcased works by Stephen Stanziano, James Wilding, Larry Baker, Matthew Saunders, and Lorenzo Salvagni.

Organist Charlotte Beers Plank and alto saxophonist Thomas Lempner plumbed sepulchral depths alongside jazz aesthetics in Stephen Stanziano's *Grant Them Rest*. The *Dies Irae* and another requiem chant set the tone and rounded the work's form, with a brighter-tempoed quotation of John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" in between. This unexpected church-and-jazz-club contrast and the performers' poise were reasons enough to follow the music closely.

James Wilding's *Meditation*, calm and lyrical, invited drifting thoughts — some spiritual no doubt, but sunnier excursions were not out of place. This piece was written on the occasion of a family wedding, and the composer invests plenty of warmth, without entirely forsaking his academic ambitions. The program note refers to Arvo Pärt, and indeed one could hear the influence, but Wilding's augmentation canons were less strict than Pärt's, making them a little harder to follow (which may have been the point). Mario Buchanan was a faithful and evocative interpreter at the organ.

Larry Baker's *Collect*, performed by Kelsey Berg, kept the liturgical ethos going. A Cleveland Arts Prize Winner and former CIM professor of composition, Baker's work is

angular and modern-sounding in the old-fashioned sense — music that challenges the listener with unexpected twists and demands attention. *Collect* takes its inspiration from Joseph Alber's visual works demonstrating variable perceptions of color. Correspondingly, this meditation messes with our aural discernment by juxtaposing different intervals and harmonic contexts.

The chain of suspended harmonies kept you guessing as shape-shifting definers of dissonance and consonance. Kelsey Berg made all of this transparent and even thrilling in her careful voicings and color modulation. She and the Skinner organ seemed unbound in their capacity for subtlety, depth, and affect.

Four of seven movements (II, III, V, VI) made the cut for Matthew Saunders' *Seven Last Words*, each inspired by a different Psalm (nos. 62, 2, 69/42, and 118) and final utterances of Christ. The music alone was a compelling agent of the scant but emotional text (given as movement titles) and a sequence of cluster-chords served as a framing device to delineate each mesmerizing and atmospheric fantasy on a different church mode. Anna Judkins gave a restrained and haunting performance.

Lorenzo Salvagni's succinct *Prelude and Fugue* was a brilliant finale, taking inspiration from J.S. Bach and César Franck Romanticism. Mayumi Naramura was the composer's faithful ally, minding the form — a free-flowing prelude and romantic four-part fugue — giving definition to rhythms (sixteenths opposing sextuplets), opulence to the chromatic harmony, and a rising sense of drama.

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