

No Exit enthralls with works by The Collective (May 28)

by Kevin McLaughlin



On Wednesday, May 28, a collaboration between No Exit and The Collective at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium testified to the merits of exploring fresh musical terrain — in the end offering rewards for both the sympathetic listener and those less easily persuaded.

After a brief welcome by CMA Performing Arts Director Gabe Pollack, the lights lowered and a short black and white film starring Timothy Beyer's head — not an AI stand-in, he insisted — introduced the concert.

The Collective is an international group of composers who have banded together to facilitate performances of their work. No Exit, Cleveland's independent new music ensemble, occasionally performs The Collective's music, as they did spectacularly on Wednesday. In June the two organizations will embark on a two-week European tour that will include stops in Greece, Italy, Poland, and the Netherlands.

Unaccompanied violin is a risky way to begin a concert, but Cara Tweed transcended both medium and moment in Agata Zubel's *Cadenza* for solo violin. Just five minutes long, and excerpted from Zubel's Violin Concerto, the piece explores the instrument's outer reaches — extended techniques, sudden dynamic shifts, and whispering *sul ponticello* effects. Tweed elevated these gestures from mere posturing into a taut, eloquent argument.

Edward Smaldone is an American composer known for blending twelve-tone techniques with jazz, and for drawing inspiration from architecture and poetry. His *Sareri Hovin Mernem*, recently arranged for clarinet, piano, and percussion, takes its title from an Armenian folk song, "I Would Die for the Mountain Wind," though the wordless piece is less a song than a poetic meditation. Romantic in tone and character, it evokes twin

longings: one for a distant beloved, the other for the Armenian people's relief from suffering.

The folk melody surfaces only in fragments, its emotional undercurrents filtered through a pop-inflected idiom. Clarinetist Gunnar Owen Hirthe supplied both atmospheric stillness and bursts of intensity, while pianist Rob Kovacs shepherded a form structured more by poetic logic than harmonic or melodic development. Luke Rinderknecht added bucolic color with tambourine, hand drum — and sleighbells strapped to his ankles. The resulting sound world felt at once distant and intimate, like a half-remembered childhood glimpsed through a windblown haze.

Composed in 2009, Spiro Mazis' *Five Haiku*, Op. 80, is a quintet for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. The piece takes its inspiration from poems by Matsuo Bashō. Each of the five movements — “Winter Garden,” “Stillness,” “The Morning Glory,” “Heat Waves Shimmering” (all translated by Robert Hass), and “The Old Pond” (translated by William J. Higginson) — captures fleeting moments and emotions through pithy musical gestures.

The performances were uniformly excellent, perhaps the highpoint on Wednesday. The performers' rotating recitation of the haiku introduced an eerie undercurrent. Whispered lines intermingled with the musical texture, as if the poet himself were being summoned — less a reading than a séance.

Amelia Kaplan's clarinet-viola duet, *a brief comment on the current state of insanity* (2017) may be succinct, but its title gives fair warning of a roiling interior. Written in the early months of the first Trump presidency, the work channels the disorientation of that political moment into sound. Violist James Rhodes and clarinetist Hirthe shadowed and prodded one another — sometimes murmuring in quiet consonance, other times combating each other irritably. The pair brought out Kaplan's undercurrent of cinematic drama, yet their pacing felt patient and reflective. The final moments, with the clarinet chirping softly over *sul ponticello* viola, hovered somewhere between wit and weariness.

Douglas Knehans's *Still Clouds* (2024) earns its title. Written for viola and piano, this seven-minute meditation unfolds in slowly turning motifs that recall shifting cloud cover — or, in the composer's words, “slowly moving strata of sounds.” There's no drama here, but lots of atmosphere: the piano pulsed gently, and the viola water-colored a peaceful landscape. The rest was a depiction of restrained serenity without obvious climax. If the piece occasionally risks inertia, it ultimately succeeds as an example of how little it takes to move the soul.

Kiki Wearing Tasha (2017), Mathew Rosenblum's homage to composer Ezra Sims, is

personally and stylistically elusive. It occupies a strange and beguiling space between microtonal drift and frontier quirk. The ensemble — flute, clarinet, violin, and cello — circles through sparse, folk-like fragments, each oddly static and charmingly off-kilter. One passage evoked the weightless, floating textures of the experimentalist Morton Feldman. No Exit's performance felt affectionate, guided by a thin but persistent emotional thread. The abrupt, eruptive ending jolted this listener from reverie — a shock, despite the fair warning tucked in the program.

Few pieces in the program felt as tethered to lived history as Constantine Koukias's elegiac *Leaving for NYC* (2018). A compact but emotionally expansive duo for violin and piano derived from the final movement of the composer's *Song Cycle Before the Flame Goes Out*, it serves as a tribute to the Jewish community of Ioannina, Greece, which was devastated during the Holocaust. The music walks a fine line between lament and ritual, evoking "leaving" as both an act of hope and a kind of tragic ceremony. Tweed supplied spare textures and aching intervals; her violin didn't narrate so much as embody memory. Kovacs' piano seemed suspended in time, following the violin's lines at a distance like a shadow. The performance was a gentle but unflinching act of testimony.

Timothy Beyer's *Three Literary Interludes* (2025) for five instruments was one of the most overtly conceptual works of the evening and the most volatile. Each movement draws from literature: Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (I. *The Violence*), Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (II. *The Life*), and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (III. *The Storm*). The music is less illustration than atmosphere, with each segment's impact enabled by controlled improvisation. In *The Violence*, terse outbursts and silences conjure a psychological battlefield. *The Life* proceeds in dreamlike fragments, with gestures floating in a shared abyss. *The Storm*, the most gripping, juxtaposes stasis and violence — evoking a man praying for chaos and finding it.

Throughout the evening, No Exit delivered disciplined, deeply committed performances of music either newly conceived or seldom heard. Each piece landed with clarity, liveliness, and, judging by smiles and applause from the audience, a deep sense of gratitude.

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