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Progressive Earplay Unit Roars Through Energetic Workout

Music Review

New Music ensembles, if they survive to become institutions, constitute a small but feisty subspecies in classical music. They can serve more than one vital function, surveying music of their time and also their region, as is the case with the San Francisco-based Earplay, which brought a fresh-tasting program to the hoary Monday Evening Concert series at the L.A. County Museum of Art's Bing Theater.

Formed in 1985, Earplay is a sextet of conspicuously fine players, game for the diversity of tasks required by the inherently eclectic slate of composers, and with a special ear toward composers from Northern California. Monday's concert proved to be a definitively "new" music program, with nary a contemporary music staple. Plenty of good ideas were bandied about, played well, and with no easy, slick amusements in the lot.

Each piece arrived with its own distinct agenda. Chinese-born composer Ping Jin's "Xipi: Themes From Peking Opera" juggles dramatic effects and gestures for violin, cello and piano—Karen Bentley, Robin Bonnell and Patricia Plude, respectively—with a keen East-cum-West synthesis. Silence

is utilized expressively, punctuating statements that are essentially atonal, except for a brief pentatonic lilt.

In Eliane Aberdam's "Ha Milah," engaging, sometimes sparring dialogue prevails. Focus is also given to the notes between the cracks of fixed ones, between the wrenched overtones from Peter Josheff's bass clarinet and the strummed strings of Plude's piano.

Josheff returned with an impressive solo reading of Pablo Ortiz's tango-inspired "Milonguitas," a series of short vignettes also echoing jazz linearity. "Before and After," by David Pereira, opens with an eventful, climactic spray of notes and works its way sideways through thematic material, like elements of a story deconstructed and told inside-out.

Closing the show on a fairly riveting note, Richard Festinger's "After Blue" is a cleverly designed showcase for the full sextet, full of hairpin turns and intricate linear puzzle-work. In a language that alternately recalls Elliott Carter and Frank Zappa, Festinger's workout makes fine use of the Earplay team, as they navigate an exhilarating, knotty maze of notes and fast-paced linkages.

—JOSEF WOODARD