



Review

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**CHAMBER
MUSIC REVIEW**

**Bang-Up
Evening,
Mixed Results**

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By Benjamin Frandzel

The San Francisco Contemporary Music Players' all-percussion evening on Monday of last week brought many of the Bay Area's strongest players together for music that veered between compelling and frustrating. The Players deserve plenty of credit for making the unusual programming choice. They were rewarded with a packed house at Yerba Buena's Forum. The invitation to the audience to explore the instruments' before the start of the concert was also a nice welcoming. The music itself provided mixed results, with some outstanding work alongside missed opportunities.

The program, which ran in almost-chronological order, surveyed some of the important developments in percussion writing over the last 70 years). The 1930s and '40s, the beginning of modern percussion music, were a natural starting point, as was *Symphony 13* (sic!), a piece by one of that era's innovators, Lou Harrison. Like much of his early music, this recently rediscovered work focuses on brisk, crisply divided rhythms and a dry timbral palette. Written for a quartet, the dominant sounds are wood blocks and tom-toms, plus suspended cymbal and several sharper metallic sounds.

Symphony 13 is an engaging concert work and a great potential dance piece, one of many examples of Harrison's deep feeling for movement. Hopefully it will find a choreographer to set it, if that hasn't happened already. It's not quite as cogent a musical statement as some of Harrison's other percussion works from the period, but it certainly shares the qualities of energy and delight that run through his diverse output. After being hidden away for decades, it's nice to have it back in the repertory.

***Crossfire* yields musical fireworks**

Richard Festinger's *Crossfire*, a premiere, received a performance of high virtuosity and commitment from Dan Kennedy and William Winant. The piece demanded no less, with its fiery passagework and finely detailed, intricate exchanges between the players. This work has many strongly appealing qualities: it's both complex and highly kinetic, sensitive to pure sound and imbued with forward momentum.

Crossfire is in three movements, with the first exemplifying the metaphor of the title. The players were set in an intriguingly complex, highly animated counterpoint. A quality of conversation, rather than imitation, was developed by pairing similar, but not identical, instruments, such as vibes and marimba. Festinger did an expert job of continually increasing the music's tension, as Kennedy and Winant exchanged upper-register trills and rapid, interlocking passages with increasing urgency.

After the opening fireworks, the music shifted focus to an exploration of sound, particularly from metallic instruments. Beautiful sustained timbres were drawn from bowed vibes, crotales, and glockenspiel. Creative use was made of drum sounds, not for accents, but to contribute to the expanding sonic palette.

A powerful ending was created by mixing the expressive modes of the first two movements. The electrifying exchanges of the opening movement returned, with pauses for the lyricism of the slower sections. The shifting of moods intensified until the work culminated in an energetic, sweeping finale.

Quiet Echoes from the Gorge

Chou Wen-Chung's *Echoes from the Gorge* (1989), for four players, offered a quieter approach. After the excitement of the first two works, the players switched gears to approach this work with the sensitivity it required. As its title implies, this collection of 13 movements has a strong connection to the natural world. Chou attempts to mirror nature more than simply evoke it. His gently paced episodes, reminiscent of thunder, rain, and wind, were at times transporting. Their unhurried, open

quality created a challenge to listen closely, and reminded me of travels in the western states. But this was finally too much of a good thing, and a sameness began to drift into the music in its last few movements, without a strong sense of closure.

Unfortunately, the program grew more disappointing in its second half, as excellent playing was devoted to unsatisfying music. Karen Tanaka's duet *Polarization* (1994) explored the variety of attacks possible on a huge collection of gongs, tam-tams, anvils, and thunder sheets, along with one bass drum and one steel drum each for Kennedy and Michael McCurdy. The players moved through their setups in loose imitation of each other, and their sequential movements added a balletic aspect.

But this piece rarely finds any clarity of form. It comes across as a series of effects, albeit not cheap effects. The gongs and tam-tams in particular produced complex, beautiful sounds that the composer obviously appreciates. Maybe this isn't really a piece for the concert hall, where the performer/audience division diminishes its potency as an essentially meditative, private work.

Irwin Bazelon's *Propulsions* (1974), concluding the program, attempted a Drums of the World approach, assembling seven percussionists to survey probably over a hundred instruments. Though its mix of Western and non-Western instruments suggest a contemporary multicultural outlook, this piece probably wouldn't be written today. Composers now are better informed of the techniques available on instruments from outside the West. The choice not to explore the full potential of the tablas, for example, along with many other underutilized instruments seems strange. A series of big buildups couldn't justify the resources at hand. The smorgasbord approach of briefly touching instruments and then moving on, diminished both interest and the work's potential power. (Benjamin Frandzel is a Bay Area musician and writer. In addition to writing concert music, he has collaborated with dance, theater, and visual artists, and has written about music for many publications and musical organizations. He is currently a graduate student in composition at San Francisco State University.)