

At the Premiere of a Challenging New Work, Difficulty Is in the Ear of the Beholder

Artists frequently dislike the descriptions assigned to their work. The term minimalist irked some composers, and the Impressionist painters called

MUSIC REVIEW

VIVIEN
SCHWEITZER

themselves by another name. The modernist composer Charles Wuorinen has disputed the label "difficult," which is invariably assigned, alongside "thorny" and "serial," to much of his music.

Difficulty, of course, is in the ear of the beholder, and many might indeed find Mr. Wuorinen's "Iridule" challenging. The work

received its world premiere Thursday by the admirable New Millennium Ensemble at Symphony Space.

Ceaselessly prolific at 69 ("Iridule" was the first of seven premieres scheduled this season), Mr. Wuorinen continues to use an uncompromising and, yes, thorny language.

But "Iridule," inspired by a passage from Nabokov's "Pale Fire," is more colorful and communicative than some of his sterner earlier works. There are snatches of jaunty melody in the oboe over a rhythmically vibrant tapestry of jagged fragments from the other six instruments:



JULIEN JOURDES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The oboist Jacqueline Leclair.

flute, bass clarinet, violin, cello, vibraphone/marimba and piano. The oboist Jacqueline Leclair, a guest soloist, played with finesse and flair.

The program also included Richard Festinger's "Construction in Metal and Wood" (2005), a virtuosic duo for piano and mixed percussion that veered from rambunctious to contemplative.

In Melissa Hui's intimate and effective "Solstice" (1994), the four instrumentalists, including piccolo and piano, played only a few pitches around an evocative oboe d'amore melody.

Samson Young's spare,

abstract and dissonant "Resonance Studies I, II, III, IV" (2006) did not leave much of an impression.

"Language Instruction" (2003), Derek Bermel's witty, entertaining and theatrical comedy, is based on his experience studying Brazilian Portuguese from tapes. The clarinet takes the role of a perky teacher patiently repeating with phrases that are first mauled, then mastered by his students, some bright and some dimwitted, represented by a violinist, a cellist and a pianist. The New Millennium musicians clearly enjoyed themselves.

New Millennium Ensemble
Symphony Space

For many listeners outside academic circles, some musical languages, which can seem rather last millennium in these excitingly visceral compositional days, will always be harder to learn. But the New Millennium Ensemble was an excellent translator, playing sometimes difficult music (for both performer and listener) with conviction, polish and understanding.