

Chicago Tribune
December, 14, 2010

MusicNOW composers in step with the pulse of the times

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It is good to see the MusicNOW series breaking out of its old hidebound ways, getting down (and sometimes dirty) with vernacular musics that don't necessarily carry an academic stamp of approval. Mason Bates and Anna Clyne, the Chicago Symphony's hip young resident composers, have their feelers out everywhere and they were on hand Monday night at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance to introduce five recent works that reflect the stylistic openness among the younger generation of American [art music](#) composers.

The music adhered to a higher and more consistent quality than has been evident in some previous programs by the CSO's contemporary arm. The improvisatory techniques of jazz were one unifying element, linking pieces by Edmund Campion, Derek Bermel and Jason Eckardt. Further links were established by the prominence both Bermel and Eckardt give the soprano saxophone in their respective works. I was also pleased to see Cynthia Yeh, one of the city's great percussion virtuosos, getting the chance to show off her amazing talents.

Jim Gailloro started things off with Campion's "Corail" (2000), in which the astonishing Chicago jazz saxophonist performed in duet with multiple electronic alter egos the composer created using interactive software in real time. Gailloro began with jazzy riffs answered by a gently pulsing ostinato, but, as he moved up the aisle and onto the stage, the dialogue grew to a rumbling tumult of improvised and synthesized sounds before sputtering to a quiet close.

The tensions between controlled and uncontrolled musical elements that drove the Campion piece also added interest to Bermel's large-ensemble piece, "[Three Rivers](#)" (2001). Two spirited improvisations were set off by three distinct rhythmic currents, ranging from funky to flowing to frenetic. Everything is put together with a crafty imagination that constantly keeps the ear off-guard. This is one sonic knockout I'd love to hear again.

Two brief chamber works, Paola Prestini's "Spell" (2009) and Eckardt's "Tangled Loops" (1996), served as appetizers for the main course, Steven Mackey's "Micro-Concerto" (1999)

The Prestini piece, for clarinet, cello and vibraphone, took the form of a lyrical andante, rather New Age-y in its gentle melodic flow and sweet, modal-tonal harmonies. As hyperactive as "Spell" was serene, "Tangled Loops" had sax player Jeremy Ruthrauff wailing and warbling over pianist Amy Briggs' jagged chordal flourishes. Here, too, the effect was improvisatory, although all sounds were precisely notated. Mackey's "Micro-Concerto" upends the traditional concerto format, slyly giving the percussion soloist new ways in which to engage musically with colleagues on violin, flute, clarinet, cello and piano. Yeh brought it off with marvelous panache and almost superhuman dexterity, coaxing sounds from a huge percussion battery that had to be heard to be believed. (The third section sounded rather like a Balinese gamelan gone berserk.) There is a bright, irreverent, hopped-up energy to this piece I found utterly engaging, unlike some of Mackey's more recent music.

Along with the performers already mentioned, others contributing to the success of the concert included Larry Combs, saxophone; Dana Hall, drum set; and CSO members Robert Kassinger, double bass; John Bruce Yeh, clarinet; Jonathan Pegis, cello; and Baird Dodge, violin. Principal conductor Cliff Colnot presided over the Bermel and Mackey pieces, eliciting the kind of precise, detailed, carefully balanced ensemble playing composers dream of but don't often receive.

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