

## **Eighth Blackbird performs new music**

If you're going to play music whose lasting value is uncertain, you might as well execute it to the n'th degree.

Eighth Blackbird's commitment to contemporary music is so complete, and their mastery of its complex idioms so total, that composers clamor to write for them. They make music sound as good as it can.

Each of the works that this Chicago-based sextet played Saturday at White Hall offered something remarkable — some aural, visual or intellectual stimulus that kept things interesting.

If only one of the four pieces struck me as something I'd want to hear regularly, that's the beauty of new music: It lets us all imagine (whether wisely or not) that we're in the "voting booth" of history.

The concert, part of the conservatory's Signature Series, opened with a piece that was as much dance as music, the "Musique de Tables" by Belgian composer Thierry de Mey.

Three performers sat at tables whose resonant surfaces (amplified from below) presented a variety of sonorities depending on how they were struck, tapped, brushed or palmed.

Strong lighting on the hands made them the visual focus, so that they provided not just the rhythm but the dance itself, their balletic movements as graceful as Agnes de Mille. Deliberate page turns demarcated three movements.

By the end it felt that the heft of the piece was more visual than sonic, and that history could indeed decide to call it dance.

Frederic Rzewski's witty, enigmatic "Pocket Symphony," composed for Eighth Blackbird, was played for all its conceptual density.

There's a narrative, even cinematic quality to this piece's alternation of precipitous ensemble playing and virtuosic solos. Big, rhapsodic melodies vie with a percussion battery that includes a metal trash can lid, a jaw's harp and a Native American rain stick.

Especially delightful in this performance was the spiky, scherzo-like third movement, filled with shimmering color and polyrhythms.

A dissonant, outsized piano solo feels like a cadenza. Later, a chord change seems to allude to Rachmaninoff, and Shostakovich's four-note personal "motto" flits by.

It's a difficult piece to hear as an organic whole, but it's fun in the maddening way that much of Rzewski's music is.

It proved perhaps too out-there for some of Saturday's patrons, who voted with their feet at intermission, leaving the audience somewhat sparser. That's a pity, because the best was yet to come.

Tamar Muskal's "Mirrors," receiving its premiere, was more visual feast than musical. As the players moved about the stage performing the repetitive music, their image was captured by an onstage video camera and digitally altered in a way that gave the impression of simultaneous decay and renewal of the image.

Digital artist Daniel Rozin, who is Muskal's husband, has created three movement patterns — falling snow, spiraling circles and marching rows of blocks — that are reflected in the patterns of the music.

The second movement, for instance, "Circle Mirror," features ostinato figures in the piano that create a sort of endless sense of rolling. The visuals throughout were stunning, but the piece was more episodic than linear, and frankly I thought the second movement would never end.

The hit of the evening was Martin Bresnick's "My Twentieth Century" from 2002, a satisfying piece that interpolates headlong, attractively minimalist music with spoken text from Tom Andrews' darkly humorous poem of the same title. ("I hopscotched in the 20th century." "I wore ridiculous clothes in the 20th century." "I wasted three years on geometry in the 20th century." "I shed pints of blood in the 20th century.")

In pairs, the performers walked behind a screen to recite their lines. Their images were projected on a screen out front, and after each of the six recitations of the line "My brother died in the 20th century" a performer would resume his or her place downstage.

Thus what appeared at first to be a personal message (Poet Andrews did indeed lose his brother.) became a universal one: We all lost a brother, many brothers, and sisters too, in the 20th century. Bresnick's flexible, diverse score helped the message to hit us, and hit us hard.

"My Twentieth Century" is subtle, skillful and substantial. That hardly seems like too much to ask of a piece of new music.

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