

Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble programs a season that seriously bucks tradition while still having fun

Preview

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble pianist Conor Hanick.

What happens when classical music is not classical? You need only climb the stairs to the upper space of the South Side's City Theatre this month to find out. There you will hear music played on orchestra instruments but written more recently than the music of an oldies or even classic rock radio station.

Mustered from around the nation, the seven musicians known as the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble and their artistic director, Kevin Noe, may be classically trained, but they aren't performing Beethoven or Brahms.

"The music we play is born of the world we are in," says Mr. Noe, who programs PNME's season, conducts and even performs in its concerts. "There is a direct resonance with the audience."

A typical season for the chamber group founded by composer David Stock in 1976 might include music by the likes of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, George Crumb, David Lang, Derek Bermel, Kevin Puts -- big names in the contemporary scene but hardly on the household level. Over the years, PNME has commissioned more than 200 works.

That's not to say that PNME has thrown out the past. Like the absurdly contradictory term of "contemporary classical music," its repertoire is rooted in and best understood through the art music tradition of, yes, composers such as Beethoven. But it explores subjects just as modern and relevant as pop or hip-hop tracks.

Yet PNME and other such ensembles wage a war on two fronts for recognition. Traditional symphony and opera devotees see new music as superfluous, while fans of just about every other contemporary genre do not even know anyone still writes music in the classical tradition.

Mr. Noe is more than willing to fight these battles. He argues that the classical music establishment's programming of centuries-old works has led to complacency in its patrons. In contrast, he feels that contemporary music "asks the audience to really listen," he says. "If you don't, you can't get a work like 'Sparrows' [a composition by Joseph Schwantner that PNME performs in its first concert weekend Friday and Saturday]. It can't be background music."

In the popular arena he emphasizes contemporary art music's ability to plumb deeper depths than most pop music simply because of the former's length and harmonic complexity.

"Pop music is designed to offer clarity to one emotion or situation in life, but it means one thing," says Mr. Noe. "There are

Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble

Where: City Theatre, South Side.

When: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through July 30.

Tickets: \$15-\$25; free for PNME first-timers. 412-431-2489.

Information: www.pnme.org.

many exceptions, of course, but they are not at the top of the charts. PNME's music is much more organic because it follows the endless diversity of the contours of the world."

Mr. Noe's advocacy is manifest in this summer's season. Themes of dealing with death, the subjectivity of beauty and the cult of celebrity are explored over four concert weekends. Unlike previous years, he has revealed these themes in the concert programs.

"It is the first time I've ever tried putting this into the brochure for a variety of reasons," he says. "I'm hoping it is a big success in helping frame the audience's thinking without giving too much information and forcing out their own interpretations."

That condition highlights perhaps the most objective difference between today's art music and its pop counterparts: Much of what PNME performs is instrumental and open to personal interpretation. "There is a level of abstraction that just cannot and shouldn't be taken away," says Mr. Noe. Even when he adds theatrical touches to performing a work -- a characteristic of the group since he took over in 2000 -- he labors to ensure the audience doesn't view the dramatic treatment as the only possible take on a composition.

The season opens with a work right down PNME's idiosyncratic alley: American composer Lee Hoiby's "Bon Appetit!" Its subject is none other than Julia Child, and Mr. Hoiby's mini-opera calls for a singer to impersonate her, even to the point of baking a cake onstage while performing. It's an honest homage to the famous chef, and Mr. Noe mirrored that with his own homage to the composer. "Only days after corresponding with Lee Hoiby about his wonderfully clever 'Bon Appetit!' and my desire to do it in an arrangement of some kind with the PNME, he sadly passed away. Once this happened, I knew that we had to move forward on this work at this time as a kind of tribute to one of the great American composers of our time."

The second weekend of concerts, July 15-16, examines "ancient rituals, timeless longings and birds that remind us of the dream of flight." Mr. Schwantner's "Sparrows," for soprano and chamber orchestra set to haiku by Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, is a highlight of the concert that is designed to connect to the concerts that follow the week after.

"The second concert is concerned with getting out of something -- escaping bonds," he says. "The third concert is what happens when you do." That weekend of concerts, "In the Wake," July 22-23, "addresses the complex and sometimes incongruous emotions surrounding the loss of loved ones," writes Mr. Noe in the program. Works such as Joe Sheehan's "Farewell Songs," Arthur Jarvinen's "Little Deaths" and Kieren MacMillan's "Metamorphosis" explore this experience both personal and shared.

PNME under Mr. Noe has been known for concerts that not only incorporate dance and multimedia but also seamlessly move from work to work more like, well, a pop concert than a symphonic one. (He also took a cue from pop bands by adopting "team colors" to the group: lime green and black.) Even as the audience applauds one work, PNME is already off to a transition or to the next work. That's the case in the concerts this summer, but the finale is even more connected than usual.

For "Vanishing Point," July 29-30, Mr. Noe programmed works for the fourth concert inspired by a three-dimensional painting by Pittsburgh artist **Val Cox**. This untitled work also is the centerpiece, hanging in the middle of the stage as "PNME explores the many facets of perspective" with works by Crumb, Puts, Kieren MacMillan, Gerard Grisey, Jeffrey Nytch and more.

If Mr. Noe throws down the gauntlet as he gives downbeats, it is his faith in the group's mission that drives his enthusiasm for the "unique voice we bring to Pittsburgh with a world-class professional new music ensemble." Here again, his response is robust vernacular interjections, not polite and saccharine symphony talk.

"We are the one and only PNME! Let the Lime-Green wonder begin!"

All you have to do is climb those stairs.

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