

Rhythm Fragments Sound Refreshing

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 Published 4:00 am, Thursday, March 27, 1997

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The dire effects of modernism continue to be felt among composers who devote the bulk of their attention to pitch and harmony, while treating rhythm as an unloved musical stepchild. The point was made once again during Tuesday's short concert by the new-music group Earplay in Berkeley's St. John's [Presbyterian Church](#).

The five chamber pieces on the program, all dating from the past five years, proved to be deft, well-crafted scores, full of interesting ideas skillfully developed. But not until the end of the program, with the world premiere of "A tutiplen" by [Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez](#), did the concert take on the kind of kinetic life that rhythmic writing can bring.

INSPIRATION FROM MEXICO

Sanchez-Gutierrez, who teaches at San Francisco State [University](#), claims that his sextet draws on themes of his native Mexico, in both the harmonic ideas and the dancelike rhythms. Those rhythms begin in fragmentary form, with all the musicians playing accented melodic figures in search of a central pulse. At last the parts merge, and after a conventionally on-the-beat section, the players celebrate their newfound agreement with a unison explosion marked by wonderfully herky-jerky rhythms.

Conductor [George Thomson](#) led a taut, vivacious reading. At only six minutes, though, the performance left a listener hungry for more; even an encore run-through would have been nice.

FLUTE AND VIBRAPHONE

The rest of the program was a bit drier, but not without its rewards. [Ronald Bruce Smith](#) contributed a dusky, mysterious duet for flute and vibraphone titled "Still/Life," whose indistinct edges made for a compelling dialogue (the vibraphone is bowed as often as it is struck). The performers, flutist [Janet Kutulas](#) and vibraphonist [Kenneth Piascik](#), seemed to be on the same wavelength.

Miguel Chuaqui's aptly named "Hyperbole" proved to be a 14-minute quintet in which all the instruments play pretty much all the time (though I noticed the cello taking five or six measures off near the end). That's a dangerous way to write music, and the impressive thing about the piece was that it worked for as long as it did, thanks to the piano's repeated swoops and the knotty but clear dialogue among the other four players. But when I lost the thread about 10 minutes in, there was no way back in: I wound up facing a wall of dense sound.

In "Vida Furtiva," [Pablo Ortiz](#) set a clarinet, violin and piano chasing after one another in

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short spurts of sinuous energy. Also on the program was "Five Daily Miniatures," Olga Neuwirth's collection of sparsely dadaesque Gertrude Stein settings; Joseph Jennings was a theatrical vocal soloist.

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