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## Earplay, Herbst Theatre, San Francisco

By Allan Ulrich

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Bay Area musicians who specialise in the performance of contemporary chamber music remain a breed apart – passionate, fearless and, even in the presence of a prolix score, remarkably empathetic. When confronted with matter of substance, their commitment can be every bit as intimidating as some of the fare they essay.

Now in its 26th season, Earplay epitomises the best of the local new music scene. To hear Mary Chun lead six musicians through a gripping traversal of Elliott Carter’s “Triple Duo” was to hear an act of advocacy for a work that, for all its rigorous craft, is not easy to love. The three instrumental groupings deliver their assignments in radically contrasting metres and, in lesser performances, the ear perceives information overload and often recoils.

Here, the musicians strove for intense characterisation. The winds chirped almost insouciantly, the strings offered velvety commentary, piano and metallophones hammered out key motives and they ended (almost) at the same time, to one listener’s considerable delight.

The remainder of the programme, dedicated to composers with California connections, wanted nothing in diversity. In the devoted performance by Terrie Baune and Karen Rosenak, the revival of John Cage’s “Six Melodies for Violin and Piano” (1950) proved fascinating for its serene, epigrammatic melodic line, its intricate rhythmic structure and gradual dissolution of tension between the two. Guest pianist Eric Zivian made an irresistible case for Jonathan Harvey’s 1994 “Tombeau de Messiaen”. Harvey celebrates the French composer’s neo-spectralism through live and recorded keyboard elements, tuned differently, yet tied to each other. Pauses and resonances were the stuff of high drama.

A revival of Mei-Ling Fan’s “Friction”, an earlier Earplay commission, found flautist Tod Brody and violist Ellen Ruth Rose traversing a stage crowded with eight music stands. The composer speaks of the energy generated by two elements rubbing together, but what one heard were two capital musicians conjuring shimmering textures. A premiere, Michelle Lou’s dismal “Alluvium”, involved screeches from cellist Thalia Moore, grunts from bass clarinetist Peter

Josheff and warbles from Brody. It was doubtless more fun to perform than to hear.

★★★★☆

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