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Earplay at Herbst

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Contemporary ensemble, timeless music

Earplay, an ensemble dedicated to new music, opened their 26th season Monday evening, February 7, at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre. "Sound Science" proved to be an entertaining and noteworthy concert, with two of the four composers on hand to comment on their works.

British composer Jonathan Harvey and American icon George Crumb shared the first half, while French-born composer Betsy Jolas and Stanford professor Jonathan Berger, both of whom were in the audience, shared the second half.

They opened with *String Trio* for violin, viola and cello, written in 2004 by Jonathan Harvey. Eminent violist Ellen Ruth Rose and frequent Earplay guest cellist Dan Reiter joined violinist Terrie Baune. They began tuning up with an energetic abandon, and it soon became obvious that the piece had begun! Baune and Rose segued into rough-sawn "barn-raising" material as Reiter beat out a tattoo on his cello, a palmas and pizzicato backdrop.

But then they dropped into a treacherous zone of high harmonics, slides and tremolos. Contrasting slick pavement against vigorous folk rhythms, this music became restless and a little uncomfortable.

Harvey, a disciple of the contradictory impulses of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Milton Babbitt, fuses electronic fluidity with bursts of color. In program notes, Harvey described string trio writing as "exposed" compared to the closer weave of a quartet. He went on to say that "That can be quite a liberating situation...the three players can pull apart and meet up." And indeed, his treatment of each is more soloistic than ensemble.

Rose shone out in a dense viola solo as the violin played a high drone and the cello whispered. There is a lovely restraint to this music within its unusual language.

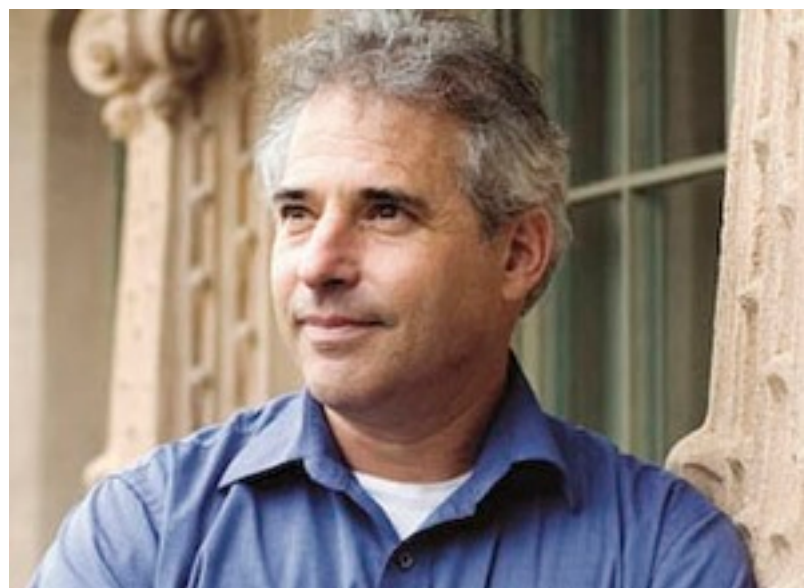
Earplay founding member Karen Rosenak was joined by pianist/composer Christopher Jones in a four-hands piano adventure by George Crumb. In *Celestial Mechanics* the inside of the piano was amplified, turning simple chords into grand gestures. Repeated notes and long decays spoke to a mesmerizing and internal voyage. And though internal, it prepared us for Crumb's thoughts on the timbres of space.

The rich palette and elegant language were Crumb's, but Rosenak and Jones imparted wholeness and shape to their delivery: from noble definition to furtive gestures, thundering chords to scampering notes, with hesitations like the fearful gaze of field mice.

In the second movement, *Beta Cygni*, flexible metal rulers bounced across the strings, adding a metallic shimmer. Eastern tonalities in the third movement resolved to uncertain dream shapes in the fourth, evaporating for a lovely finish.

After intermission Baune and Rosenak returned, along with Earplay member Thalia Moore, associate principal cellist of the SF Opera orchestra. Betsy Jolas wrote *Ah! Haydn* as a deconstruction of the final theme from Haydn's *London Symphony*, No. 104 in D Major. But along with those teased-apart remnants of Haydn, one could clearly hear the French modernist school in jazz inflections and coloristic chords. The influence of Jolas' mentors, Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen, peeked out with insistent rhythms and complex clusters, and those two competing qualities created the tension of the work.

Low cello notes and high violin set an expansive horizon, sketched in with piano trills and string tremolos.



The final work, *Yaqira*, took its name from the Aramaic for "precious." In this World Premiere, jointly written for Earplay and for Madrid's PluralEnsemble, Jonathan Berger offered his attention to the natural beauty of each instrument. Peter Josheff entered with a gorgeous clarinet solo, and the others layered in, spiced with Rosenak's high piano clusters. Baune and Reiter returned for a violin-cello ground, over which Earplayer Tod Brody lent flute acrobatics. In *Serene*, the second movement, Brody's high notes ghosted into transparency and refraction over Reiter's soulful cello. And in the fourth movement, *Filigree*, the flute's long tensions turned to Syrinx-like plunges and dangerous climbs.

Winds over strings, an almost-Taoist sense of nature, turned topsy-turvy in the angry third movement, *Con forza*. Here staccato piano undercut the slippery clarinet material and high violin notes.

Berger's material is unexpectedly vivid. A long-time researcher into the effect of music on the brain, he displays a careful balance of

consonance and dissonance.

Earplay returns to Herbst on Monday, March 28 with another commission and premiere in "Sound Tangents."

—Adam Broner

Top, photos of composers Jonathan Berger and Betsy Jolas. Bottom, photo of Earplayers, courtesy of Earplay. This article previously published in the *Piedmont Post*.



From left: Todd Brody, Ellen Ruth Rose, Karen Rosenak, Mary Chun, Thalia Moore, Peter Josheff, and Terrie Baune.