

CCP shines in challenging season opener

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By Wynne Delacoma

The University of Chicago's Contemporary Chamber Players has had its ups and downs since its founding four decades ago by the indomitable composer Ralph Shapey.

At times, the programs were doctrinaire and performances felt more like graduate-student recitals than professional concerts. But CCP has been on a roll in the last few seasons. With composer Shulamit Ran as its artistic director and Cliff Colnot as conductor, CCP's 2003-04 season opened Friday night with a winning combination of intriguing music and superb performers. There was an air of luxury in Mandel Hall that came from knowing that CCP has some of the city's best young musicians at its disposal ready and willing to play challenging music.

U of C has not one but two outstanding young ensembles in residence, the Pacifica Quartet and eighth blackbird, and both were on hand Friday night. (Both groups have won the Naumburg Award, one of chamber music's most prestigious prizes; Pacifica in 1998 and eighth blackbird in 2000.) The ferociously intense Pacifica was featured in two works, Sofia Gubaidulina's haunting "Perception," written between 1981 and 1983 for soprano, baritone, strings and tape, and Osvaldo Golijov's "Last Round," a 1996 tango-inspired work for two quartets and double bass. Dorothy Chang's restlessly searching "Wind/Unwind," composed last year, was performed by eighth blackbird members Molly Alicia Barth, flutes; Michael J. Maccaferri, clarinets, Matthew Albert, violin/viola, cellist Nicholas Photinos and pianist Lisa Kaplan.

Coming after intermission, Gubaidulina's 13-section "Perception" was the major work. Colnot conducted soprano Tony Arnold, baritone Stephen Swanson and the Pacifica plus violist Claudia Lasareff-Mironoff, cellist Daniel Klingler, bassist Kathryn Nettelman and David M. Gordon handling additional pre-taped material.

With its text drawn from the Psalms, poetry by Gubaidulina and her friend, the German poet Francisco Tanzer, "Perception" unfolded with Gubaidulina's signature atmosphere of austere, awe-struck mysticism. Arnold was spellbinding, whether reciting Tanzer's text in an urgent, ghostly whisper or sending forth Gubaidulina's deliberate, wide-ranging vocal line with laserlike clarity. Swanson found understated drama in his long stretches of spoken declamation and quasi-sung speech. But in the seventh movement titled "At the Sea," he found warm nobility in the Bach-like melodies.

Golijov's "Last Round" opened the concert with the steamy parry and thrust of tango partners dancing to kill. Despite the often dense, nocturnal moments of "Wind/Unwind," eighth blackbird never submerged their strongly colored, individual voices.

Close Window

Contemporary Chamber Players at Mandel Hall

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By Wynne Delacoma

The University of Chicago's Contemporary Chamber Players have been experimenting with both their musical mission and administrative setup in recent years.

Founded in 1964 by Ralph Shapey, the formidable composer and University of Chicago faculty member who oversaw the group until 1993, the Chamber Players' programming is now chosen by a committee of music faculty members. Two young, lively ensembles – the Pacifica Quartet and eighth blackbird, which specializes in new music – are in residence for performances and sessions with student and established composers.

With such major changes in the air, it was fascinating to hear a CCP concert devoted to ritual Sunday afternoon at the U. of C.'s Mandel Hall. The program opened with John Adams' powerfully minimalist "Shaker Loops" from 1978, performed by the Pacifica's four string players, plus

two from eighth blackbird, and guest bassist Doug Johnson. Jan Radzynski's "Three Hebrew Melodies," completed in 1984, followed with the Pacifica and eighth blackbird's pianist, Lisa Kaplan. The concert closed with Stephen Hartke's "Tituli," a setting of ancient Roman inscriptions composed in 1999 featuring the Aguava New Music Studio, a vocal quintet, plus violin and percussion, conducted by CCP's resident conductor Carmen Helena Tellez.

Rituals, ceremonies devised to mark human events from birth to death, imply repetition. We use rituals to mark major, universally experienced life transitions, as if by returning to prayers or actions we know well we can smooth the way to a new, perhaps unwelcome, stage in our lives. Sunday's works by Adams and Radzynski took the concept of repetition one step beyond, emphasizing the element of repetition within ritual music itself.

Few composers create more exciting music out of tiny, incessantly repeated musical fragments than John Adams, and the CCP players, conducted by Tellez, plunged fearlessly into his urgently driven "Shaker Loops." The violins were incandescent, sending forth an endlessly shimmering line that hung in the air, swaying like a fragile, imminently breakable silken cord. At one point, the pace relaxed, and single strokes leaped from the relentless background with the clear, plaintive sound of a wet finger rubbing the rim of a crystal glass. In the final section, Adams' repetitions took on the thundering power of an accelerating freight train.

Radzynski's arrangements of Jewish melodies from Ashkenazi, Yemenite and Kurdish traditions were a heady mix of dissonance and exotic, darkly minor harmonies. Urged on by the slow, steady clang of Kaplan's piano, the Pacifica Quartet turned the second melody, "Ayalat Khen (Gracious Gazelle)" from Yemen, into a massive, irresistibly rhythmic dance.

Hartke's "Tituli," a finalist for the 2000 Pulitzer Prize in music, occupied a quieter, more haunted place. The voices of Aguava New Music Studio came and went serenely, sometimes blending into dissonant harmonies, often sailing off into five different, uncharted realms. Hartke's texts were touching, including fragments from a 6-year-old's tombstone and simple inscriptions on gifts given more than 3,000 years ago. Matt Albert's occasional, sharply sweet violin outbursts and the dusky sound of a bow

drawn along the edge of a wooden marimba plate added to the hushed, otherworldly atmosphere.