

Review**34th Annual Bowling Green New Music Festival**

by Larry and Arlene Dunn



With the abundance of opportunities to hear new music in northeast Ohio, Cleveland classical music cognoscenti might not think of the musical riches that sit two hours west on the turnpike at Bowling Green State University.

The 34th annual Bowling Green New Music Festival, October 16-19, 2013, showcased the school as an international powerhouse in the field of contemporary music. Prior festivals have presented a hall-of-fame of new music artists, including

composers John Cage, Philip Glass, Pauline Oliveros, and George Crumb and ensembles such as the Jack Quartet, Philip Glass Ensemble, and International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE).

George E. Lewis, Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University, (pictured above) was this year's featured guest composer and Chicago-based Ensemble Dal Niente served as featured performers. German was the dominant international flavor, thanks to partial support of Dal Niente's participation by the Goethe-Institute Chicago.

The sheer volume of activity at the four-day festival was mind-boggling: 10 concerts, 48 compositions (five world premieres) by 42 composers, 27 guest or faculty musicians, and over 100 student performers. The entire festival crackled with energy, during performances there was a palpable release of the tension built up over the year or more of planning and rehearsing.

In addition, there was a multi-media art exhibition, "New Art & Sound," with works by Lewis, Terry Adkins, and Pamela Z. Five of the compositions played were by Lewis, who also gave Thursday's opening lecture on the relationship between improvisation and composition. Saturday morning, he and Rob Wallace, professor of literature at BGSU, held an informal conversation about improvisation in other contexts, followed by an improvised music performance from Wallace and the Black Swamp Underground.

A festival highlight was the Friday evening Dal Niente concert. Executive Director (and saxophonist) Ryan Muncy and conductor Michael Lewanski brought a team of 15

musicians to present five works, two of them world premieres – Lewis' *Assemblage* (for piano, harp, percussion, violin, viola, cello, saxophone, clarinet and flute) and *Undercurrents*, by BGSU professor of composition Mikel Keuhn (for harp, piano, guitar, 2 violins, viola, cello, bass, clarinet, oboe, flute, saxophone and 2 percussionists).

Assemblage pulsed with high energy, with little reprieve from the start to the conclusion. Percussion was in the driver's seat right out of the gate, as percussionist Eric Derr raced from one end to the other of a complicated L-shaped battery with barely enough time to get there, let alone strike the correct instrument with the designated mallet.

Other instruments also took on very percussive personas: Winston Choi pounded the strings of the piano with a wood block and dragged a metal rod across them, Ben Melsky strummed muted harp strings with a credit card, the strings played extended *pizzicato*, and the wind players' key-tapping and breathing overwhelmed their tonal output. When the energetic swells dissipated, there were lovely moments carried by the piano and swirling harmonics in the strings over delicate harp arpeggios, which suddenly yielded again to the surging textures of percussion-led mania.

Nearly the entire ensemble took the stage for *Undercurrents*. In contrast to the manic, high energy in Lewis' work, *Undercurrents* was fluid and atmospheric. The string quartet opened with soft tones and the winds, piano, and brushed percussion joined to unleash swirling waves of sound. The delicate flow was occasionally interrupted by stark percussion strikes and abrupt stops and starts, punctuated by unison *pizzicato* gestures on the strings. Muncy, with a bright melody on soprano saxophone, led the way into the final section over shimmering strings and brushed cymbals. The music slowly became softer and softer, with long decaying tones, then faded to black.

The balance of the Friday evening program explored Dal Niente's connections to the contemporary music scene in Germany. For several years the group has participated in the Darmstadt Summer Courses, and in 2012 became the first ensemble to win the Kranichstein Music Prize, the highest honor for performers. They played three works from composers with roots in Germany. Rebecca Saunders studied in Berlin and was awarded the Deutscher Musikautorenpreis for Instrumental Music in 2010. Evan Johnson was the recipient of a Fellowship Prize at the 2012 Darmstadt Summer Courses, and composer Enno Poppe is Music Director and conductor of ensemble mosaic in Berlin.

Saunders' alluring *Stirring Still II* employed piano and bass on stage with flute, clarinet, and bowed crotales positioned in the audience, spatializing the sound. A duet between bassist Mark Buchner and pianist Mabel Kwan was echoed and repeated by the distributed instruments. The sparse phrasing was passed from musicians on stage to visible and invisible musicians located around the hall creating a haunting, ghostly, multi-layered dreamlike state, intensified by the confusion as to precisely where sounds were originating.

Johnson's piece, *die bewegung der augen* (for saxophone, violin, viola, guitar, clarinet, oboe, English horn, upright piano and percussion), was also soft and subdued, full of quiet complexities. The very slow pace filled the air with tension as it held the resolution at bay. Percussionist Gregory Beyer's continual scratching on the surface of a large bass

drum provided the rhythmic core. Kwan's piano work was intense in its restraint, as she played subdued notes with incredibly light touch.

Friday evening closed with Poppe's *Salz*, for flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, electronic keyboard, string trio, and percussion. A haunting, microtonal opening melody by violist Doyle Armbrust was joined by a slowly building, rumbling bottom line from the keyboard, bass flute, and cello, seasoned with crisp strikes on bongos. The momentum built to a crescendo, then suddenly shifted to a bass flute and drums duet. The keyboard, sounding like a crazed calliope, led the full ensemble through a cacophonous finale of wild gestures, played with abandon.

The other events at the festival presented a rich buffet of contemporary music from many sources. In addition to *Assemblage*, four more Lewis works were played and one by composer Richard Carrick was dedicated to him.

Carrick's *Harmonixity* for saxophone quartet percolated with counterpoint and shifting tempos. It was fervidly played on Friday afternoon by students from BGSU professor John Sampen's studio.

Thicket was written by Christopher Dietz for the bassoon quintet Dark in the Song. Quintet member and BGSU graduate Jamie Leigh Sampson and four local bassoonists gave a spirited reading on Thursday evening. Sounding like a flock of crows in a dense grove of trees, they conversed in dense harmony with bluesy edges. A slower, moody section in darker hues and swerving rhythm culminated in a long unison buzz, giving way to a closing hocketed melody passed from player to player.

BGSU professor Marilyn Shrude's *Within Silence* was offered on Friday afternoon with Shrude herself at the piano, her husband John Sampen on soprano saxophone, and their daughter Maria Sampen on violin. The piece was written in tribute to John Cage's 100th birthday and features *scordatura* (retuned) violin tuned to C-G-A-E. The violin and saxophone exchanged a haunting, swirling melody. Over sparse interjections by the piano, they wandered in and out of each others pitch and sonority. The overall effect was intoxicating.

On Saturday afternoon, Dal Niente's Muncy (who received his Masters' in saxophone performance at BGSU) gave the world premiere of Marcos Balter's *Cardinal* for solo baritone saxophone. From a furious toneless key-tapping start, slight blurts of tone escaped with increasing frequency, magnified by heavy reverb, like a voice straining to be heard.

A recent festival development, started in 2009, is aimed at developing the next generation of composers. Saturday morning's Young Composers Concert featured six pieces by students in grade 7 through 12, played by BGSU students. Included were the three prize winners from the statewide 2013 BGSU Young Composers Competition and three young composers from Toledo School of the Arts.

A standout was *Océano* (for classic wind quintet), by first-prize winner Alex Berko from Solon in suburban Cleveland. This two movement work was very lyrical and filled with

sensations of summer winds and ocean waves. Based on the evidence from this concert, there's a lot of great new music yet to come from the state of Ohio.

It is not too early for interested listeners to start making plans to attend the 2014 festival. Kurt Doles, Director of the Mid-America Center for Contemporary Music, which produces the festival each year, announced that next year's featured artists will be composer Paul Dresher and The Paul Dresher Ensemble.

Photo of featured composer George Lewis reviewing one of his scores with BGSU students courtesy BGSU Marketing & Communications.

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