



## Music Review: New music delight at first U3 Festival

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Post-Gazette Classical Music Critic

Virgil Thomson once said of composing American music that, "All you have to do is be an American and then write any music you wish."

For most of the last century, that same freedom hasn't applied to academia. Their difficult and surprisingly conformist compositions, seemingly written for other composers instead of listeners, have driven a wedge between audiences and new music.

But a series of concerts showcasing the faculty composers of three local universities -- Carnegie Mellon, Duquesne and Pitt -- offers an alternative. The U3 Festival, the first of its kind here, is showcasing a healthy, diverse and relevant local scene with 14 composers contributing music that's accessible in the best sense of the word. The robustness of their connection to audience has a national significance: It's the latest sign the long-awaited thaw of icy, demanding music has nearly run its course.

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***The U3 Festival finishes at 3 p.m. today with a different program of works at Bellefield Hall, Oakland. Tickets \$5-\$10, free to students with ID; call 412-396-6083.***

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Come on in, the music's fine.

Wednesday night the festival opened at Carnegie Music Hall to recent music by the big hitters in the local scene, CMU's Leonardo Balada, Alan Fletcher and Nancy Galbraith and Duquesne's David Stock. The universities also designed the festival to show off their student ensembles and faculty, which did their best to deal with a staggeringly varied group of scores.

Balada's Concerto for Piano and Winds (1973) belongs to a crossroads in his aesthetic, a transition from the heavy-handed modernism to a more accessible style involving folk song. Pianist Donna Amato and the Duquesne Wind Symphony under Robert Cameron began by imitating a ping-pong match, with the theme bouncing back and forth throughout the ensemble. From this novel and quirky way to manifest the inherent competition between soloist and orchestra, things soon got more testy, as the tutti overcame and interrupted the soloist with its chatter. She had her revenge in a sly insertion of a Chopin-esque middle movement and a raucous net slam of clusters in the third.

Stock's "Earth Beat" is equally significant to his output. His predilection for distinctive rhythms reached its logical conclusion with this concerto for timpani and winds, performed by the Carnegie Mellon Wind Ensemble under the able leadership of Denis Colwell. The soloist was Timothy Adams, a versatile and open-minded percussionist. Although the first movement lacked focus, Stock gave Adams a near impossible task in the second: play a melody on the timpani drums, designed for harmony only. The result was effective. The cadenza following was a masterpiece of sound ingenuity and rhythmic structuring. The third movement turned the entire ensemble into a percussion instrument.

Galbraith has taken one of the artiest of the new composing styles, minimalism, and made it her own. Her Wind Symphony No. 1 displayed a warmth and gentle touch Philip Glass never found, complete with melodies and an admirable vulnerability. At times its harmony proved facile to me, and the third movement held too great a flavor of fanfare music, but the sound she drew from the CMU Wind Ensemble exhibited a deft understanding of what's the natural best with that instrumentation.

I frankly don't know what to say about Fletcher's enigmatic "A Glistening Music," which professed to have been doubly inspired by Messiaen and Eminem! I thought I heard a gunshot/rim shot as it transitioned from a Messiaen section to a middle section of Eminem/Dr. Dre-inspired music, which did have a good slow groove in the percussion, but the Duquesne Wind Symphony under Jonathan Neiderhiser didn't do much with the work.

Thursday night found the U3 in Pitt's Bellefield Hall. Leading off were two Pitt composers, Eric Moe and Mathew Rosenblum.

I don't think the CMU Contemporary Ensemble ever got a firm hold of the wheel of Moe's "Eight-Point Turn." The off-phase first movement needed more confident playing, if indeed it were meant to be out of sync. In any case, the obsessive repetition of the fragments worked well in Moe's always fresh-sounding orchestration and musical language. One could almost taste the apprehension, frustration and annoyance stemming from the subject. The nifty trap-set beat that emerged from that texture was club-worthy. Led by Eduardo Alonso-Crespo, the CMU students finally got comfortable at the end, as the flutist played an exasperated melody.

Granted, Rosenblum's "Ancient Eyes" was the only piece of the fest I'd heard before, but I still feel it's the most memorable. In this work, Rosenblum splits the octave into an unconventional 19 steps. This "out of tune" sound instantly makes the work un-clichéd, perhaps the most important thing any composer can do. Yes, the pioneering Harry Partch did it first, but he never composed as well as Rosenblum with the new octave. The CMU students fully embraced this graceful, light and ecstatic piece.

Alonso-Crespo's (CMU) "Macbeth" Suite was nicely done, ultra-traditional incidental music with a Latin flavor. The premiere of Lynn Emberg Purse's (Duquesne) new age work, "Three States of Being" was energetic but rather four-square. That was, until its delicate ending, symbolizing entropy, which the Duquesne Contemporary Ensemble and Stock handled well.

The same forces, joined by mezzo-soprano Mimi Lerner, performed Reza Vali's (CMU) "Folk Songs, Set X." Lerner, in fine form, lent passion and precision to these unfamiliar, though quite universal, Persian texts. They are a shining example of Vali's uncanny ability to meld even the most contrasting aspects of different cultures. The atmosphere of the "Lament" for Messiaen was especially touching.

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[Back](#)