

The Birmingham News

Luna Nova proves it's a shining star

Wednesday, June 29, 2005

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At Luna Nova's daring concert Tuesday, it was easy to pretend that Hess-Abroms Recital Hall was an experimental music venue in New York or a Vienna salon in the early 20th century, not the Alabama School of Fine Arts.

Formed just two years ago, this dynamic ensemble from Illinois, Atlanta, New York and Birmingham performs classic avant garde from the 1910s to the 1970s alongside premieres and new commissions. Its appearance at the Birmingham Art Music Alliance season closer gave about 50 devoted listeners a taste of the variety of modern and postmodern music, while giving a nod to Alabama composers.

In fact, three of the evening's five works were by local notables. Birmingham-Southern's Charles Norman Mason, a recent Rome Prize winner, has created a clever, congenial work in "Fast Break!" It harks back to the bleeps-and-bloops language of 1970s electronics works by Stockhausen and Davidovsky, but he manages an updated sound palette with clean, digital tracks. Luna Nova's quintet, comprised of violin, cello, flute, clarinet and piano, provided the instrumental fiber, which Mason has extended with seamless transitions to two speakers flanking the stage.

Dorothy Hindman explores three textures in "Setting Century." Its relentless ticking, ominous bell-like piano chords and expansive melodies each are strong statements, but are a bit too long and static.

Kurt Carpenter gave the quintet free rein with drawings by Vassily Kandinsky, in which the composer inserts pitches for improvisation. There's a bit of drama in the work as the musicians get a chance to literally strut his or her stuff by marching around the stage while soloing. The success of music in this genre depends largely on the musicians' talents, which were plentiful in this performance.

James Romig's "Ferocious Alphabets" is a throwback to Milton Babbitt's overly cerebral brand of serialism. Although it's more listenable than much of Babbitt's music, Romig's work was overshadowed by the more personal statements of the Alabama composers.

Most refreshing about this concert was Arnold Schoenberg's "Chamber Symphony," arranged for quintet by Anton Webern. One of modern music's most influential composers, Schoenberg is largely a stranger in these parts, so this performance was more than welcome. Its gutsy, angst-driven expressionism was played with conviction by the group, which Romig conducted. Adam Bowles' driving pianism, coupled with Helen Kim's soaring violin solos, held this difficult work together nicely.

Luna Nova hasn't yet gotten out all its ensemble kinks, but with its stellar credentials and obvious devotion to its craft, that should happen soon.

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