

GLF resident composer Joel Hoffman's work deserves wider audience

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Joel Hoffman, resident composer of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. / Great Lakes Festival



By [Mark Stryker](#)

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The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival's commitment to [new music](#) plays out throughout the two-week event, but a showcase concert also draws a tight frame around a resident composer.

Some of America's most celebrated composers have held the title, including Elliott Carter, William Bolcom, John Corigliano and John Harbison. This year's composer, Joel Hoffman, 58, feted with a concert of his works Monday, has had a productive but more modest career.

A colleague of Great Lakes artistic director James Tocco at the College-Conservatory of [Music](#) in Cincinnati, the Canadian-born Hoffman could be a stand-in for a broad swath

of the field: university professors whose music gets performed and recorded, though rarely by leading ensembles or in prestigious venues.

Of course, quality is often independent of fame, but sometimes it isn't. A career as a composer is such a crapshoot that the best approach is to applaud anyone who has found a way and to listen with receptive ears. With that in mind, Monday's concert featured some compelling music that deserves wider circulation, but also works in which the polished craftsmanship and percolating ideas never quite gelled into a larger vision.

Most rewarding was the oldest work, "Fantasia Fiorentina" (1988), for violin and piano. Bright, joyous and songful, the music unfolded like a 15-minute rhapsodic conversation between friends, the gestures sometimes animated and sometimes intimate. Cast in a warmly tonal idiom, the piece was rich with savory dissonances that kept the ear alert.

The writing was athletic, but a lyric impulse drove the melodies, which sat on top of swirling dance rhythms. A central waltz -- a wink at the Viennese? -- brought smiles. Tocco and violinist Kim Kaloyanides Kennedy were powerful advocates, bringing charisma, virtuosity and a burnished tonal blend to the music.

Played energetically by the Catalyst Quartet, the String Quartet No. 4 (2011) packed a lot into three short, tightly argued movements. But not until the sweetly nostalgic finale did the music soar. "Unaccompanied Minor," a solo cello work written for a young artist competition, also sounded buttoned down, despite some flashy passages and the flair and musicianship of Andrés Diaz's performance. Maybe the constraints of the commission made it difficult to let loose.

"L'Immensita' dell'Attimo: 3 Songs of Mario Luzi" introduced an abstract language well-matched to the dreamlike symbolist poetry by the Florentine poet. Pianist Pei-Shan Lee and soprano Lauren Skuce were engaged performers.

Finally, the world premiere of Hoffman's Piano Trio No. 4 represented his experiments with silence. Nine eclectic miniatures -- some dry and distilled, some jazzy, some feverishly romantic, some buzzing -- were filled with and separated by halting silences. Composers as diverse as John Cage, Morton Feldman, Thelonious Monk and Roscoe Mitchell have explored the expressive possibilities of silence -- negative space. But in Hoffman's trio the idea sounded heavy-handed, cerebral, interrupting the flow rather

than broadening it organically. The Trio Terzetto played with exceptional poise for a young ensemble.

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More Details: Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

'The Music of Joel Hoffman'

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out of four stars

Monday Kirk in the Hills Bloomfield Hills

Festival continues through Sunday

248-559-2097 www.greatlakeschambermusic.org