

Inspired dialogue: 'Hand Eye' translates visual art into music

Mark Stryker, *Detroit Free Press* 8:37 p.m. EDT June 28, 2015



(Photo: Luke Ratray)

Composers have long found inspiration in the visual arts and vice versa. Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" is the most familiar example, even if the original paintings by Viktor Hartmann remain obscure.

Morton Feldman's "Rothko Chapel" and "For Philip Guston" provide more recent analogues. Feldman's pure, luminescent surfaces and whispered abstraction evoke the canvases of the painters he loved. On another front, American artists from Stuart Davis to Romare Bearden, Bob Thompson and Jean-Michel Basquiat drew ideas about line, color, shape, visual rhythm and form partly from ideas they found in jazz.

"Hand Eye," an evening-length work by the the Sleeping Giant collective of six composers, extends the cross-pollination into the present. Given its world premiere Saturday by Eighth Blackbird at the conclusion of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, the piece, grew out of conversations between the sextet and the major contemporary art collectors and Detroit philanthropists Maxine and Stuart Frankel. Soon the Sleeping Giant composers — Timo Andres, Christopher Cerrone, Robert

Honstein, Andrew Norman, Ted Hearne, Jacob Cooper — were looped into the project. Each wrote a piece inspired by a work of their choosing from the Frankel collection.

(The Frankel Foundation, Carnegie Hall, University of Texas and Mellon Foundation are all co-commissioners.)

The result was a rewarding and charismatic 75-minute piece that proved to be strikingly unified in its musical materials and emotional effect. Partly this was because of a shared eclecticism and post-minimalist aesthetic among the composers — all in their 30s. All favored pulsating rhythms and textured stasis, accessible grooves, gleaming surfaces, animated instrumental writing (including non-traditional techniques and sounds) and a mostly tonal-but-sometimes-not approach that, in the language of painting, toggled between between abstraction and figuration.

The composers also consciously borrowed elements from each other to bridge movements, and the similarities in the art, rooted in the Frankel's curatorial eye, probably also helped unite the work. Three of the works were high-tech, interactive installations, two by Random International, one by Zigelbaum and Coelho — and all of the works reveal a certain physicality and intensity.

Sometimes the connections between the art and music seemed very specific. The obsessive mark-making of Astrid Bowlby became in Andres' "Checkered Shade" an opening volley of oscillating repetitions for violin, piano and chiming mallet percussion. In "Cast," Cooper translated the disquieting nostalgia of Leonardo Drew's paper constructions of tiny childhood trinkets into fragmented sonic scrapes and tolling vibraphone.

Elsewhere, the composers' responses were more generalized but no less effective. The rage and sorrow embodied in Robert Arneson's portrait of the man who murdered Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party was embodied by a violent rumble of a prepared piano, followed later by melancholic, improvisatory chords. Pianist Lisa Kaplan was at her most authoritative here.

Weaknesses? There's not much by way of memorable melody compared to inspired rhythms and sonorities, and the lack of counterpoint could be dulling. And though it was wise not to project images of the art during the performance, the slide show in the lobby was too unfocused to help the audience connect the dots.

Eighth Blackbird played with its customary brio, skill and precision. Percussionist Matthew Duvall was a particular force on his battery of instruments, and clarinetist Michael Maccaferri, violinist Yvonne Lam, cellist Nicholas Photinos and flutist Tim Munro (making his last appearance with the ensemble) all took advantage of moments to shine. But as always with Eighth Blackbird, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

Contact Mark Stryker: 313-222-6459, mstryker@freepress.com

'Sleeping Giant: Hand Eye'

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Three stars (out of four stars)

Saturday, Seligman Performing Arts Center, Beverly Hills