

# San Francisco Chronicle

THE LARGEST DAILY CIRCULATION IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

## Music review: Switchboard Music Festival

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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If a new-music jamboree is a fine thing - and there's no doubt that it is - then why not spread the bounty across an entire afternoon and evening? That would seem to be the thinking behind the Switchboard Music Festival, which took up most of an exuberant Sunday at the Dance Mission Theater in the Mission District.

Curated by composer-performers Jeff Anderle, Ryan Brown and Jonathan Russell under the umbrella of New Music Bay Area, this eight-hour marathon provided a capacious home for all sorts of unpredictable musical goings-on. The offerings ranged from rock-tinged improv to traditionally scored concert pieces, and from traditional Chinese instruments to the klezmer-polka-tango mashup of the band Japonize Elephants.

Along the way, the lineup of performers included a few Bay Area new-music luminaries - among them the vocal-electronics diva Pamela Z and the composers and instrument inventors Paul Dresner and Joel Davel - as well as host of younger artists clearly intent on blurring the boundaries between styles and genres.

Naturally, no one was expected to sit politely in their seats throughout the festivities. The ethos for Switchboard Music, now in its second year, involves plenty of in-and-out privileges, so that audiences can sample what they want for as long as they want, coming and going as they please.

Attendance on Sunday peaked at around 100 late in the afternoon, dwindling to perhaps half that number as the festival reached the finish line. When Anderle, introducing the final set of the schedule, asked whether anyone had stuck it out for all eight hours, a few doughty souls raised their hands and were suitably applauded for their stamina.

The DNA for this project goes back to Opus 415, a similar marathon presented periodically during the 1990s by San Francisco composers Dan Becker and Belinda Reynolds, and before that to the 24-hour marathons in New York a decade earlier that launched the seminal contemporary-music festival Bang on a Can.

Issues of logistics are almost as central to the success of these undertakings - and every bit as tricky - as artistic considerations, and in that respect the curators of Switchboard Music were largely on their game.

Most impressive, perhaps, was the simple fact that careful planning and swift set changes allowed the festival to stick to its timetable. Few things gladden the heart of a coming-and-going

music listener like returning to the scene at a specific time and finding events moving along exactly as promised.

Conversely, the floor plan of the Dance Mission Theater - where patrons can only enter and exit by traipsing conspicuously between the stage and the front of the audience - tended to inhibit people's ability to move freely, and led to awkward pileups near the entrance. Nothing to be done about that, I suppose.

The musical wares on display during a day's worth of intermittent visiting fully lived up to the promise of the event. I was particularly struck by Brown's "Same Mistake Twice," a jumpy, vivid fugue-like entertainment for two electric guitars and electric bass, and by Ken Thomson's brief "Throw Back," for a chamber ensemble supplemented by several stick-wielding percussionists.

"Many Thousands of Airplanes," a catchy, surprising and often witty chamber piece by Damon Waitkus, got a vivacious performance under Russell's musical leadership; the piece builds surely to the final movement, a jazzy strut that suddenly gets stuck in a groove and has to be rescued and restarted.

Later, the Adorno Ensemble gave a gorgeous performance of Mason Bates' "Red River," as well as a forceful but sometimes unsteady account of David Lang's "Cheating, Lying, Stealing" (dedicated, according to cellist Michael Graham, to Bernard Madoff).

Pamela Z delivered a handful of her solo numbers, ranging from intricate abstractions to a cover version of The Troggs' "Wild Thing," and Japonize Elephants put the seal on a long day with some up-tempo dance tunes. A fine time was had by all.

E-mail Joshua Kosman at [jkosman@sfgate.com](mailto:jkosman@sfgate.com).

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