

# PIEDMONT POST

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## **When classical musicians let their hair down**

*Music review by Adam Broner*

Blurring genres, San Francisco's second annual Switchboard Music Festival entertained the serious, the curious and the jaded for eight hours on Sunday, with a sundry cast of Bay Area musicians who have broken away from established territories in their search for personal sound.

Organized by composer Ryan Brown and bass clarinetists Jeff Anderle and Jonathan Russell, 11 separate programs were held at the 24th St. Dance Mission Theater, from Pamela Z's exquisite solo looping to the 12 members of Neptune's Rogue Apothecary.

Instruments varied from orchestral to jazz and rock band, with some newly invented contenders. Paul Dresher and Joel Davel examined the boundaries of percussion and string instruments when they created their 15 foot long four-stringed "quadrachord." Occasionally they plucked and bowed, but then they got serious and did what percussionists always do--they beat on it! Davel worked a "marimba lumina," directing electronic effects and loops with careful slides of his mallets.

Apothecary's *Blossom* and *Faustina* abused chunks of color and contrasted them. Graham Connah's liquid keyboard blended with Jess Ivry on cello, then cranked up for blue-grass fiddle, played by the lightning-fingered beauty, Alisa Rose. Bass clarinetist Beth Custer, baritone sax Tom Griesser and Ben Goldberg on clarinet got down and demanding with unison figures and tight harmonies.

Melody of China was surprisingly tame for a trio known for covering contemporary music on traditional Chinese instruments. But such gorgeous tones--plaintive erhu, fiercely hammered dulcimer, droplets and waves of harp (guzheng)--reminded us of the polished satisfaction of tradition. And its limitations.

Bass clarinet quartet Edmund Welles already breaks a musical no-no (four of the same instrument, and that, a usually solitary one), so fusing classical with heavy metal may have been a walk in the park. *Agrippa's 3 Books*, by composer and member Cornelius Boots, brought rich chords whose thick overtones allowed unlikely harmonies. Boots was joined by Aaron Novick, along with Jonathan Russell and Jeff Anderle, festival organizers and members of the duo, Squonk.

Like "biggest loser" drop-outs, this group has bottom to spare. After a thick bass line, others layered over to construct compelling rhythms and complex sound. Froggy plops and jazz-club slides alternated with assured fifths and Balkan blues, sounding surprisingly natural.

The audience slipped in and out for refreshments, as did I during Moe! Staiano's snare performance. But when I saw him rush out of the theater to the sound of a fire alarm, I thought he had accidentally set it off. Hardly true--he brought his own alarm with him, a dubious member of the percussion family. Looking at scattered debris on the floor, I confided to a fellow audience member that Staiano was known for destroying a piano as part of a composition. "Oh, yes," he enthused. "Did you see it? I helped."

Four members of the high-profile Adorno Ensemble performed Mason Bates' Red River along with taped electronica. The live instruments became part of an electronic landscape with long slick patches and high keyboard runs (Kate Campbell) descending into dark muttering. Violinist and new music champion Graeme Jennings, formerly with the famed Arditti String Quartet, cellist Michael Graham, and clarinetist Anderle wove in and out of the electronic evocation of a river's journey, at times airy, then lyrical, and finally pure funk. They wound down with long sonorous chords, to the slap and echo of wet electronic footsteps.

The ensemble was enlarged with local percussion favorite Loren Mach abetted by Ryan Brown and Erika Johnson on brake drums--not a typical drum, but borrowed from a car! David Lang, founder of New York's Bang on a Can, wrote the minimalist *Cheating, Lying, Stealing* to showcase percussion, and the genre they blurred was instrumental: the cello's long bowed notes grew out of brake drum pitches, while staccato clarinet and piano were pure rhythm.

For those of you who have yet to hear Pamela Z, her partly improvised pieces use electronic sampling and looping to construct surprising textures out of her wide vocal range and forest of techniques. Labial rolls looped for a bottom track, over which she laid soft cottony monotones. Her growls and grunts were so convincing that the operatic high notes were a delight. The set ended with *Birdvoice*, in which she slows and deconstructs a birdsong, then rebuilds it from her own voice, segueing to French Art Song on the voice of a bird.

Closing the evening was the high-energy Japonize Elephants, slewing merrily over convention with House Band/Gypsy/Jazz/Hillbilly sensibility (!). Mitch Marcus on tenor sax and Alisa Rose on violin added depth of feeling to guitarist Sylvain Carton's romps. And grounding the whole in a skewed dimension was accordionist Marie Abé and David Gantz, master of junk percussion.