

The New York Times

New Faces Head Off to a Venerable Spot

Anthony Tommasini
June 30, 2010

At one time it would have been unthinkable that a hip Greenwich Village music club could host a send-off for young musicians heading to the formidable Darmstadt summer courses in Germany.

In the aftermath of World War II a center for the propagation of the most complex, modernist styles of contemporary music was founded in Darmstadt, near Frankfurt. By the 1950s the Darmstadt summer courses, as they became known, were seen as indoctrination camps in the orthodoxy of serial composition, enforced by the dodecaphonic police, composers like Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono.

Yet on Tuesday night Le Poisson Rouge, the all-embracing hot spot for new music, presented the top-notch International Contemporary Ensemble, called ICE, and the dynamic JACK Quartet in a program to celebrate this year's participants. Chances are that many of the young listeners who packed the club and cheered the performances knew little, if anything, about the role of Darmstadt in the contemporary music battles of earlier years. By the late 1960s Darmstadt had evolved into a more genuinely experimental venture, where composers of all stripes, like John Cage, Morton Feldman and Gyorgy Ligeti, shared their nondogmatic music.

Perhaps to show how things have loosened up, ICE began the program with "Tracking Pierrot," a 1992 work by Earle Brown. A pioneer in the use of open forms, Brown was a godfather to the downtown music scene in New York. "Tracking Pierrot," scored for flute, clarinet, piano, violin, cellos, vibraphone and marimba, nods to Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" but pays homage to Feldman in its pensive opening and closing sections. It evolves in separate gestures in which rustling figures alternate with cadenzalike flights. Some chord progressions sound like Messiaen. The performance was masterly.

ICE will play a different Brown piece at Darmstadt next month along with works by young American composers. This was announced by the composer Nick Hallett, a director of Darmstadt Classics of the Avant-Garde, a new-music series based at the Issue Project Room in Brooklyn that has claimed, somewhat playfully, the Darmstadt name.

The JACK Quartet then gave a plush, compelling account of a new work by the young composer Caleb Burhans, "Contritus," a flowing, ruminative and ravishing piece that evokes medieval and early Renaissance sacred works expressing contrition. Minimalist riffs run through stretches of the piece, but they are broken up with rhythmic irregularities to keep listeners a little wary.

ICE returned for Jason Eckardt's "16," scored for flute, violin and cello. The title refers to the controversial 16 words in President George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union address about Saddam Hussein seeking uranium in Africa, which was found to be untrue. Apparently this frenetic, crazed outburst of a piece is an expression of the composer's political anger and dismay. In any event, the music was certainly gripping.

JACK ended the evening with a subdued, expertly controlled account of "Culs-de-sac (en passacaille)" by Yoshiaki Onishi, written in honor of his father's 65th birthday. The piece inventively explores ways to produce wondrously beautiful scraping, fluttering, trilling, quietly grating sounds. Who needs electronic instruments when a composer can draw such varied, eerily alluring sounds from good old string instruments? This piece should fit right in at Darmstadt today.