

# The Washington Post

## Argento Chamber Ensemble: Alluring Austrian Soundscapes

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February 11, 2009

It is a simple description: contemporary Austrian composer. But when ghosts like Schoenberg and Webern still hover over the country, the title is as much a burden. For Georg Friedrich Haas, 55, that existence means pushing far beyond those early explorers, conjuring experimental, boundary-pushing sounds. The New York-based Argento Chamber Ensemble conjured one of those singular soundscapes -- a vast but tightly integrated 70-minute work -- at the Austrian Embassy on Monday evening.



The piece "In Vain" is a broad-brushed essay for 24 instruments. Haas has created a hermetic world, something that skeptics might ruefully call overly brainy and intentionally impenetrable. If there is anything to those charges, in Argento's polished reading, it was a pulsing, breathing and often beautiful thing.

To hear "In Vain" is to come face-to-face with a kind of floating, sonic orb. That sphere undergoes often radical shifts in texture and color, while holding its basic form. Long figures densely bunched together might morph into a floating sound cloud. Pitches sounded in one tuning method transform in subtle gradations into a series of notes intoned under entirely different system. Yet, with all that surface activity -- now glacial, now coruscating -- the basic vastness and sense of infinity remain.

Conductor Michel Galante deployed clear gestures to direct the entries of various phrases and chords, while the ensemble delivered the needed intonation and precision. The ensemble opted against following Haas's instructions to play extended passages in darkness, which might have better highlighted a path between light and dark. It was a small sacrifice in a performance that captured the alluring strangeness of Haas's music.