

Vigorously Applying the Power of Percussion

By STEVE SMITH

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“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” Arthur C. Clarke wrote in the third of his “laws of prediction.” As the Marticians, a new ensemble, performed at the Juilliard School on Wednesday night, a musical analog came to mind: “Any sufficiently complex compositional language is indistinguishable from spontaneity.”

That overstates the case perhaps. But this group — which was formed by Alexander Lipowski, a percussionist and Juilliard graduate student, and Michel Galante, a conductor and composer, and includes three percussionists — made the modernist classics it played sound fresh and impulsive.

It performed in the Bruno Walter Studio as part of the Juilliard Percussion Seminar, a summer training program for high school musicians. Its name comes from “Le Marteau Sans Maître” (“The Hammer Without Master”), a Pierre Boulez piece included in its program. Presumably, any allusion to deadlier matters is just a touch of mordant humor.

Karlheinz Stockhausen strictly schematized and rigorously controlled pitches, intensities and durations in “Kreuzspiel” (“Crossplay”), an early instance of total serialism from 1951. He further regulated acoustical qualities through selective amplification, and even mapped the stage setup, which requires, for example, a platform 5 feet 4 inches high for the oboist.

You might think that so much plotting would render stiff results. Actually the piece is a brief, beguiling flurry of color and motion. The little clusters and patterns Steven Beck played at the far ends of the piano sounded almost jazzy; Anna Steltenpohl, an oboist, and Rane Moore, a

bass clarinetist, flitted and wove in the gaps between Mr. Beck’s notes. Gregory Beyer provided a pulse on congas, while two more percussionists, Mr. Lipowski and Matthew Gold, punctuated with gentle patters and explosive thwacks.

Iannis Xenakis limited his instrumental palette for “Okho” (1989) to the djembe, a kind of West African hand drum. As in most of his music, he used complex mathematical schemes to create complex interrelations of timbres and rhythms among the players. Even so, qualities specific to each musician and drum guarantee that no two performances sound alike. Mr. Lipowski, Mr. Beyer and Mr. Gold visibly enjoyed themselves during an earthy, exuberant account.

The concert ended with “Marteau,” completed in 1955 and considered a landmark for its uncanny fusion of Webern’s crystalline structures with Debussy’s sensual timbres. In practical terms that means that in a performance this assured, you can easily forget ever hearing the word serialism and simply be swept up in the sexy cool of Mr. Boulez’s elegantly ordered universe.

Bo Chang, a mezzo-soprano, brought power and nuance to the vocal movements. Erin Lesser, a flutist; Miranda Sielaff, a violist; and Oren Fader, a guitarist, played with confidence and style, and Mr. Galante was a keen, clear leader. A surprisingly large audience hung on every note, and roared in approval at the end.

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