

Austrian Avant-Garde: Eerie Textures and Text

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The Moving Sounds Festival means its title to be taken in every possible way. The works performed during this three-day event are meant to be moving, if not always emotionally then viscerally or intellectually. Some of the pieces make significant use of spatial elements: the sounds move around the stage. And because the ambitious schedule of concerts, symposiums and exhibitions is split between two locations — the Austrian Cultural Forum and Le Poisson Rouge — the sounds are moving around town as well.

The festival, a collaboration among the two concert spaces, the Argento New Music Project and the Musical Information Center of Austria, took over Le Poisson Rouge for two concerts on Saturday night, having opened in the afternoon at the forum with a performance by DJ Dorian Concept and the video artist Astrid Steiner.

At the early evening show, Michel Galante led his Argento Chamber Ensemble in substantial works by Beat Furrer and Bernhard Lang, two experimental Austrian composers. Mr. Furrer's "Xenos" explored color and dynamics in two mirror-image movements.

In the first, gentle pointillistic timbres are eerily woven around a spoken German text. Mr. Furrer, as his own narrator, spoke in short bursts, often in single, uninflected words. The words and notes seemed to hang in the air at times, and to dissolve quickly elsewhere, creating an effect that became more ethereal as the work unfolded.

The textless second movement was the opposite in every way. The graceful, otherworldly sounds on which the first movement was built gave way to sharply articulated, dissonantly blaring woodwind and brass chords, and eventually to a mechanistic passage that combined rumbling low notes and a steady, searing high pitch.

Mr. Lang's music is concerned with the psychological impact of repetition, although his use of the effect owes less to the Minimalists than to turntable-massaging D.J.'s. In "DW₂," short phrases are repeated, elongated, varied, replaced and revisited, all in a zany texture of bending clarinet and saxophone lines, slapped percussion figures, electric organ passages and vocal lines. Singers and speakers sometimes repeated text (including the words "repetition" and "habit") and sometimes offered brisk flights of stream-of-consciousness imagery. Tightly composed sections were offset with improvisatory bursts that shattered the sequence of repetitions.

Particularly striking in this account of "DW₂" were the virtuosic violin solos by Miranda Cuckson, Oren Fader's inventive contributions on the electric guitar and Carol McGonnell's mesmerizingly insistent clarinet playing. The vocal soloists were Daisy Press, mezzo-soprano, and LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs and Rizgar Koshnaw, speakers.

At the late show, Mantra Percussion and Friends gave a finely polished performance of Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians," a turning point in the composer's career, and in the history of Minimalism. Performances of the work have been plentiful lately, and the Mantra players seemed to find a fresh source of energy in its hypnotic pulse, appealingly morphing themes and syncopated, overlapping rhythms.

The Moving Sounds Festival continues through Monday at the Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 East 52nd Street, Manhattan, acfnj.org; and at Le Poisson Rouge, 158 Bleecker Street, near Thompson Street, Greenwich Village, lepoissonrouge.com.

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