

What a Long Strange Trip It's Been

Monday Evening Concerts



Michel Galante and the very fine Argento Chamber Ensemble returned Tuesday to Los Angeles and their home away from home, Monday Evening Concerts, hosted at Zipper Concert Hall downtown. As usual Galante and MEC Artistic Director Justin Urcis had put together a fascinating program of music less than thirty years old. The joys of MEC are many but being exposed and, perhaps, surprised by the unknown is chief among them. This first program of 2011 was built around the West Coast Premiere of Fausto Romitelli's *Professor Bad Trip*. Romitelli was an Italian composer who died prematurely in 2004 at age 41 but left behind a significant body of work that grew out of his studies with the likes of Grisey and Donatoni both in his native Italy and in Paris at IRCAM. He was influenced not only by spectralist techniques but also by the likes of Giacinto Scelsi, and *Professor Bad Trip* is marked by waves of sound that are closer to drones than not. Romitelli was also interested in the boundaries, or lack of them, between musical genres; and the 40 minute, three-movement *Professor Bad Trip* plunges right to the heart of this by juxtaposing familiar classical music instruments against wailing electric guitars.

The work forages in the fields of psychedelic rock for its contrasts and the music often speaks to states of altered consciousness. The professor in this "Bad Trip" may well be Henri Michaux whose words from his own drug-influenced writings adorn Romitelli's score. The three movements, or "Lessons" as Romitelli calls them, were composed between 1998 and 2000 and were introduced separately by a voice-over. Interestingly, with all of the electronic wailing in the piece, the biggest licks of the evening went not to the electric guitars but to an electric cello. Argento's Jay Campbell flew at the instrument for an extended solo in "Lesson 2" that rivaled anything I've heard on a rock concert stage. The work was filled with other oddities including kazoos and harmonicas all

amplified in a way that highlighted the other-worldliness of the sound. Interestingly, none of this overwhelmed the more traditional elements of the ensemble including violin, viola, piano, clarinet, trumpet, flute and percussion. This was far from a battle of the bands but more like two distant relatives sharing one strange but fascinating trip.

Before the psychedelics were a number of smaller works, often cut from similar, but far more subtle cloth. Brian Ferneyhough's *La Chute d'Icare* contrasts a methodical small ensemble against a dizzying flurry of notes from the clarinet played with remarkable dexterity here by Carol McGonnell. She returned later in the first half with perhaps the most contrasting eight minutes of solo music imaginable with Salvatore Sciarrino's *Let me die before I wake*. McGonnell explained after the show that Sciarrino was inspired by the subject of euthanasia for this short solo that involved extremely quiet notes that were only partially sounded, each tone both originating and expiring with little more than breath sounds. The near silence held the unbelievably still audience completely transfixed throughout. The evening was filled out with three miniatures from Gérard Pesson including *La Lumière n'a pas de bras pour nous porter*. This solo work for piano was played by Joanna Chao and, like the Sciarrino, called for keys that were only partially sounded in a random pattern with most of the sound generated from the striking of fingernails against the keys, which was then amplified.

At the end of the program, conductor Galante, McGonnell and guitarist Oren Fader stayed on stage for a brief discussion in an effort to connect more with the Zipper Hall audience. They talked about their struggles to find opportunities to develop richer, longer-lasting experiences with particular individual works, given the amount of rehearsal time the ensemble spends on them. This has been a challenge for Argento, which do not have the economic and political advantages that most of their European counterparts enjoy. The group, however, talked about an exciting experiment of weekly concerts they performed last year in New York, playing the same pieces weekly over a period of a month to audiences that would often return repeatedly. And while their appearance at MEC may have been a one-off here in Los Angeles, the chance to take this particular "bad" trip was worth all the effort. Here's looking forward to their next visit.

BTW, Argento will reprise their performance of Georg Friedrich Haas' *in vain* in New York on Feb 18 at the Park Avenue Armory as part of the Tune-In Music Festival and it should not be missed if you're in town.

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