

Unearthly Harmonies, Best Heard in the Dark



Brian Harkin for The New York Times

Michel Galante conducting the Argento Chamber Ensemble.

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During Georg Friedrich Haas's "In Vain," the listener experiences a heightened state of awareness, becoming acutely attuned to the intricacies of a psychedelically beautiful soundscape that often unfolds in total darkness.

I heard the Argento Chamber Ensemble play "In Vain," a 75-minute work for 24 musicians, at the Miller Theater in 2009. The group offered a brilliant performance of this mesmerizing piece, which is distinguished by both its emotional power and its fascinating construction.

The Argento will perform "In Vain" on Friday at the Park Avenue Armory as part of the Tune-In festival, which begins on Wednesday and features four concerts of contemporary music organized by the ensemble Eighth Blackbird. "In Vain" is programmed with Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians," an apt pairing, given the similarly visceral impact of that piece.

Mr. Haas, 57, is an Austrian composer associated with the French spectral school, which evolved in the 1970s as a rebellion against the strictures of serialist music. Timbre and resonance are central in the spectral aesthetic, initially influenced by French composers like Messiaen, Debussy and Ravel, and by works like Stockhausen's "Stimmung."

Spectral composers use computer analysis of the acoustic properties of sound as compositional building blocks, with the overtones created by a note used to produce shimmering sonorities. Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey were early proponents of the spectral aesthetic. In "Gondwana" (1980), for example, Mr.

Murail incorporated a computer analysis of the overtones produced by a trombone chord.

Michel Galante, who led the performance at the Miller Theater and who will conduct Friday's event, said in a recent interview that "the spectral composers wanted to create beautiful, lush, physical, sensuous sounds," which Mr. Haas certainly does in the vast and iridescent canvas of "In Vain." At times, it seems impossible that acoustic instruments could create such unearthly sounds, which often evoke electronic music. While he shares the spectralists' focus on timbre and their interest in exploring overtones, Mr. Haas does not use acoustical analysis to compose. As Ligeti did in "Atmosphères," Mr. Haas relies on micropolyphony and microtonality: a system in which the conventional Western scale is divided into many more than its usual 12 pitches. With "In Vain," this results in opulent and eerie harmonies.

While his music often sounds startlingly new, Mr. Haas has paid homage to Mendelssohn, Schubert, Mozart and the Italian Renaissance composer Gesualdo, whom he quotes in his String Quartet No. 3. That work, which is also performed in the dark, has been championed recently by the JACK Quartet.

Mr. Haas is unusual in the way he wields light and darkness in his scores. Stipulating that a work be performed in a pitch-black hall sounds potentially gimmicky, but in this case it isn't — it renders the experience initially disorienting, then intoxicating.

There is artificial light everywhere, Mr. Haas said in a phone interview in explaining his decision to write music for darkened spaces. "We do not have any night in our modern life," he said. "But I think our body and our souls desire night, and I give this in my art. If we close our eyes, of course our ears are more sensitive. Maybe we don't listen to music; we listen more to sounds."

When composing "In Vain," Mr. Haas said he incorporated light "like a silent percussion instrument." His swelling soundscapes become even more startling when suddenly pierced by ghoulish glimpses of the musicians, a phantom orchestra that ominously fades away.

Performing in the dark is obviously an enormous challenge for the players, who must memorize chunks of the score and play without visual cues. "We have to prepare everything in rehearsal, and then it's a huge leap of trust," Mr. Galante said. "Everyone's awareness is heightened."

Discussing "In Vain" from a listener's perspective in a preconcert chat viewable on YouTube, the composer Bernhard Lang said: "Awareness of sound and perception is changed. There is something political going on." In the 1980s, he added, composers like Luigi Nono, the avant-garde Italian, said that there couldn't be any new sounds. "But now here comes Georg Friedrich Haas and blasts the whole system and creates something which you've never heard before."

Mr. Galante described Mr. Haas as "a very modern, romantic composer, except without the clichés of romanticism. Only the spirit and the idealism of it."

Indeed, Mr. Haas wrote "In Vain" as a protest against the success of the extreme right wing in the 1999 Austrian elections, although the piece "is too beautiful for the right wing," according to Mr. Haas.

After conducting "In Vain" at the Miller Theater, Mr. Galante said, he felt as if he had "gotten the wind knocked out" of him.

"I was sitting there in a stupor," he said. "It's amazing to hear a work that makes you think differently about the possibilities of music."

And it's intriguing how hearing such music in a setting removed from the concert comfort zone can affect your perception of ordinary sounds. After the performance in 2009, I drifted out of the Miller Theater in a mild trance, attuned to how the noises of street and subway were meshing into a haunting nocturnal soundscape.

The Argento Ensemble performs "In Vain" at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, at 67th Street, on Friday; armoryonpark.org; (212) 616-3930.

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