

# Better Late Than Never, a Nod to 'Pierrot Lunaire'

## Argento Chamber Ensemble at the Austrian Cultural Forum



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times  
Argento Chamber Ensemble, conducted by Michel Galante, performing Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" at the Austrian Cultural Forum in Manhattan.

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If you are a classical music fan and you are breathing, it is likely that you will encounter Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" this season. May 29 is the 100th anniversary of that work's tumultuous premiere in Paris, and the celebrations are already in full swing.

It has been harder to come across commemorations of the centennial of another formative work of modern music. On Oct. 16 the anniversary of the first performance of Schoenberg's idiosyncratic song cycle "Pierrot Lunaire" passed with little fanfare. Even a music lover could be forgiven for having missed it.

Just slightly belatedly the Argento Chamber Ensemble is honoring "Pierrot" with "Lunar Movements," a series of six concerts juxtaposing the cycle with more recent music that bears its influence. The first program, on Saturday evening at the Austrian Cultural Forum, featured the potent combination of "Pierrot" and four works of whispery virtuosity by Matthias Pintscher.

The reasons for the different fates of "The Rite of Spring" and "Pierrot Lunaire" this season make sense. Unlike the vivid, sweeping "Rite," a formidable, irresistible display of an orchestra's colors and chops, "Pierrot" is a resolutely intimate chamber work for a vocalist and just a few players.

The texts — German translations of French poems that turn the characters of the commedia dell'arte into vessels of surreal angst — are alluring but forbiddingly strange. The vocal style is too: Sprechstimme, between speech and singing, remains bracing for both singers and audiences.

Paula Robison's performance on Saturday certainly was. Aggressive and often shrieking, Ms. Robison, best known as a flutist, was responsive to the words but also brought to mind the unfair stereotypes of "Pierrot Lunaire" — harsh, unpleasant — that have dogged it over the last century.

While alert to the score's spikiness, the instrumentalists were more careful to emphasize its beauties, as with Lance Suzuki's gorgeous flute tone at the start of "Der Kranke Mond" and the cellist Jay Campbell's Romantic richness in "Gemeinheit." The precision and delicacy of the playing — Conor Hanick was the pianist and Carol McGonnell the clarinetist — tied it to Mr. Pintscher's music, in which every effect is carefully, quietly calibrated.

In "Janusgesicht" ("Janus Face," 2001), Mr. Campbell and the violinist David Fulmer sat back to back for the softly rising and falling lines. Taka Kigawa brought out the gentle subtleties of "On a Clear Day" (2004) for solo piano.

Mr. Fulmer captured the calligraphic gestures of "Study III for Treatise on the Veil" (2007), influenced by a spare, ghostly Cy Twombly painting of the same name. He was joined by Mr. Campbell and the violist Stephanie Griffin for "Study II for Treatise on the Veil" (2006), whose continuously unfolding wide-open spaces are nevertheless always under quivering pressure, like music at the bottom of the sea.

*"Lunar Movements" continues through Dec. 16 at the Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 East 52nd Street, Manhattan; (917) 733-6266, [argentomusic.org](http://argentomusic.org).*

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