

New Adventures in Composition



Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal
Choreographer Miro Magloire, right, rehearses with dancer Elizabeth Brown for a piece to be paired with new music.

By Pia Catton

Certain words in the arts lexicon raise red flags for me. "Soundscape" is one of them. It suggests I'll wind up in an uncomfortable chair listening to single notes of music arranged in a way that is outside my comfort zone. For hours.

So the SONiC (Sounds of a New Century) Festival, a nine-day survey of contemporary concert music beginning Friday, didn't exactly have me at "hello." Says the brochure: "A decade into this new millennium of ours, the soundscape of our time is being written and rewritten by a new generation."

Red flags waving around, yes, but there's also a compelling point: An entire generation of young composers has followed Philip Glass, Steve Reich and John Adams, and it's not exactly basking in attention.

"We're looking at composers that have come of age in the last 10 years and are making their voices heard," said the festival's co-curator, Derek Bermel. "There are 120 composers involved, but there could have been 120 more."

Their names may not be broadly familiar, but during the SONiC Festival—presented in various locations by the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University and American Composers Orchestra—their work will be performed by ensembles that have garnered some attention, such as the International Contemporary Ensemble (which lit up the Mostly Mozart Festival this summer) and the Grammy-winning six-piece Eighth Blackbird. And the concerts are not in bohemian venues with uncomfortable chairs. They're in 11 locations ranging from Symphony Space to Carnegie Hall to the 92YTriBeCa. (Well, at least the chairs start out comfortable.)

My pick, though, is for the program slated for the Joyce SoHo, "New Sounds, New Moves" (Oct. 19-21), which matches four choreographers with four composers, and is a direct outgrowth of previous efforts among New York artists to find one another: Since 2006,

the Joyce SoHo has hosted an occasional series of "speed-dating" sessions for composers and choreographers. With laptops and headphones, the composers share their work with dance artists looking for new music, with both sides looking to find like-minded collaborators.

SONiC's Mr. Bermel had participated in an early session, and while talking to one of his festival's artists (the Argento Chamber Ensemble's conductor Michel Galante), the idea of including the dance world came up. Mr. Bermel then reached out to Joyce SoHo program manager Cathy Eilers, who put together another meet-and-greet in May. Some of the resulting pairings will be on stage next week.

"Live music and live dance is a wonderful thing to experience. Often it doesn't often happen together. There are different funding sources," said Mr. Galante, whose Argento Chamber Ensemble will perform three of the four pieces of music created for "New Sounds, New Moves."

Mr. Galante contributed a composition—which includes two marimbas onstage—to which choreographer Miro Magloire added a narrative dream duet for two women. Mr. Magloire is best known as the founder of the New Chamber Ballet, a small ensemble that gives intimate, beautiful performances at City Center Studios. For this project, he's using a more modern dance idiom. And because Mr. Galante gave him a rough recording of the music just a few months ago, Mr. Magloire found his process hastened considerably. "Usually," he said, "I'll listen to music for two or three years, then I feel I know it well enough."

A much different process emerged for New York-based composer Konrad Kaczmarek, who is pursuing his doctorate in composition at Princeton University, and choreographer Rebecca Stenn, a Juilliard graduate who founded her dance company in 1996. After meeting at the Joyce SoHo session, the two decided to hash out each step of their collaboration together. "We have spent hours and hours improvising in the studio," Ms. Stenn said.

Their piece is a solo dance set to Mr. Kaczmarek playing piano, with digital manipulations; a portion of the final work will be improvisational. Said Ms. Stenn, "We are extremely sensitive to each other."

The one-hour program will also include choreographer Deborah Lohse, who has created a film to be shown with live music by composer David Fulmer. And composer Michael Klingbeil has created music with piano and playback for a five-dance work by choreographer Darcy Naganuma.

While this dance program is just one slice of a much larger music festival, it's a quick double-dose of what's happening now. If you want the big picture of new 21st-century music, SONiC will present more than 50 premieres. "It's not who's the most famous or most cool. It's a snapshot of a generation," said Mr. Bermel.