

# European Modernist Comes to America, Bearing Gifts

## Argento Chamber Ensemble Performs at Austrian Cultural

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

Published: July 4, 2013

During a postconcert discussion at the Austrian Cultural Forum on Tuesday, the Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas said he hoped to make connections between the European and American schools of composition. Mr. Haas, who begins his tenure as a professor at Columbia University in September, is the latest in a long line of distinguished European composers to have moved to America.

The striking aesthetic of Mr. Haas, who has participated in modernist hubs like Darmstadt, Germany, and Ircam, the electronic-music center in Paris, is rooted in the French spectral school, in which timbre is particularly important. He uses overtones created by particular notes to produce alluring sonorities, with visceral and passionate results.

Mr. Haas has found excellent champions in the JACK Quartet and the Argento Chamber Ensemble, which introduced American audiences to Mr. Haas's extraordinary "In Vain" in 2009.

At the Austrian forum concert, the Argento ensemble, conducted by Michel Galante, offered the American premiere of Mr. Haas's "Atthis" for soprano and eight instruments. (The group performed the version for instruments at the space in 2010). Introducing the work, Mr. Haas said he wanted to compose a cycle of love songs like Schubert's "Winterreise," but with a happy ending. In "Atthis," based on German translations of love poems by Sappho, the protagonist, named after one of the poet's pupils, ends up with her lover.

No translations were provided for the texts, but even so, a narrative arc was clear, beginning with the plaintive vocal lines that stretched over the gentle swellings of the strings. (The work is scored for two violins, viola, cello, double bass, clarinet, bassoon and French horn.)

The soprano Sharon Harms, wearing a long black dress and standing on a small table, sang with expressive conviction and dramatic urgency, her swooping glissandi cutting through the oscillating, high-pitched strings of one section. Consonance and dissonance swelled and meshed in the microtonal canvas, with the ensemble creating resonant waves of sound around the soprano's startling vocal lines.

In contrast to the full-blooded textures of "Atthis" were the stark, fleeting miniatures of Schoenberg's Six Little Piano Pieces (Op. 19), expressively rendered by Joanna Chao. The first half of the program also included Mr. Galante's effective arrangement for quintet of the Adagio from Berg's "Kammerkonzert," featuring the violinist Aaron Boyd as an expressive soloist.

Before a vivid rendition of Webern's Three Little Pieces (Op. 11) — ably performed by the cellist Jay Campbell and the pianist Conor Hanick — Mr. Galante said that the ensemble strives to find the intimate, quiet sounds that are vital to these particular works. It was a pointed request to the noisily rustling and fidgeting members of the audience.

This review appeared in print on July 5, 2013, on page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: European Modernist Comes to America, Bearing Gifts.