

Ghosts Lurk in Some Sounds

Argento Chamber Ensemble at Austrian Cultural Forum

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The Argento Chamber Ensemble has made regular appearances at the Austrian Cultural Forum recently, championing artists like the Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas and earlier Viennese composers. Its concert on Sunday was its first there without music by an Austrian; a piece by Alban Berg, of Vienna, was canceled because of a performer's illness. The show went on with a focus on contemporary American composers.

The ghost of Berg could be discerned in the premiere of "Mnemosyne's Beams," a song cycle for piano and soprano by David Fulmer set to texts by Pushkin. Accompanied by Philip Fisher and occasionally hitting a triangle herself, Sharon Harms worked hard to produce a wide range of vocal gestures — from piercing, guttural sounds and breathy noises to swooping lines and a Sprechstimme delivery of certain phrases. All the eclectic utterances in the extremely slow-moving piece didn't do much to enhance the text, nor did they gel into a coherent whole.

In Aaron Einbond's "Beside Oneself," for viola and live electronics, the violist Stephanie Griffin created a more alluring palette of sounds, ranging from fast, jittery gestures that permeated moments of silence at the beginning of the piece to a frantic outburst punctuated with a trill. Longer soaring lines dissolved into an electronic haze. In Aaron Helgeson's "Through glimpses of unknowing," influenced by the artist Chiharu Shiota and performed by the pianist Joanna Chao, delicate, misty clouds

became more turbulent and evaporated into gently dissonant waves of sound.

Sebastian Currier's "Deep-Sky Objects," performed by Argento and conducted by Michel Galante, was the most substantive work. In this cycle, set to poems by Sarah Manguso, the protagonist (passionately sung by Ms. Harms) tells of her love for a man on a remote planet. Some intergalactic electronic sound effects bordered on hokey, but over all, the colorfully scored piece flowed effectively, with attractive vocal lines and vivid contrast between angular, driven sections and those of a more introspective hue.

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