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MUSIC REVIEW

Expressive range of Slee Sinfonietta fills Cleveland State's Drinko Recital Hall

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Composers often go to extremes as they explore expressive ideas and sonic colors. The spectrum of musical possibilities certainly was vast Monday, when members of the Slee Sinfonietta occupied Drinko Recital Hall at Cleveland State University.

Occupied is the right word. The musicians didn't just sit or stand onstage. In artistic director David Felder's "Dionysiacs," players were arrayed along the upper sides of the hall to envelop the audience in a wash of layered sonorities.

The professional chamber orchestra from New York's University of Buffalo is in town for a residency at CSU that will culminate in a recording of the works performed Monday under the auspices of the Cleveland Contemporary Players. Along with two pieces by Felder, the ensemble presented Moton Feldman's "Rabbi Akiba" and the world premiere of CSU composer Andrew Rindfleisch's "Opening Veins."

The last work is a gripping journey into the high anxiety of the creative process. Piercing clarinet and saxophone riffs lead to frenetic rhythms, wind and brass screams and percussive damor. The Varese-like din occasionally relaxes into troubled tranquility, with an accordion adding mysterious shadings.

Rindfleisch has a whale of a time teasing the listener with uproarious sonic gestures and rhythmic vivacity. Even when strings play soft harmonics, a flute ruminates and a double bass and trombones rumble, something is stirring. An ensemble exclamation point brings the piece to a brilliant close. The performance, led by the composer, was a thriller.

James Avery conducted the rest of the program, which journeyed to a subtle world in Feldman's "Rabbi Akiba" (1963), a "vocalise" that barely raises its voice. The two movements are based on a tale from the Talmud, and an aura of chant can be discerned in the soprano's wordless lines amid soft instrumental tones and silences.

It's a haunting experience, especially as shaped with pinpoint pitch and tonal beauty by soprano Elizabeth Weigle -- replacing Lucy Shelton, who withdrew because of a family emergency -- and the meticulous players.

Felder's two scores are intricate examinations of sonority and space. "Canzone XXXI" takes a brass quintet through a series of wild fanfares, rhythmic puzzles and muted declamations. Two trumpets, horn, trombone and bass trombone travel the farthest reaches of their ranges as they converse or come to unison terms. The players gave it a bold, vivid account.

A large Slee contingent applied daring artistry to "Dionysiacs," which places six flute soloists and an assortment of instruments at the front of the stage. Wind and brass players in the hall and an ensemble onstage complement the flutes' jagged and airy flourishes with contrasting sonorities, sometimes on water goblets and nose flutes. The results are ethereal, quixotic and cantankerous.

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