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Ensemble's 'Wails' of war creates musical storm

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MUSIC REVIEW

Zeitgeist

Zeitgeist, the Minnesota-based contemporary-music ensemble whose name means "spirit of the times," lived up to its hip moniker Monday night at Cleveland State University when it performed a program of new and recent compositions.

The concert, an event presented by the Cleveland Contemporary Players, tapped a host of current musical trends. But one piece, Frederic Rzewski's "Wails," which ends in a frenzy of shrieking both instrumental and vocal, seemed particularly apropos.

Rzewski composed "Wails" 20 years ago as a lament for victims of war. For the predominantly young audience Monday night, however, the piece might as well have been the soundtrack to this month, as fierce battles rage across Iraq and an election here revealed a country starkly divided.

"Wails" develops organically, and the four members of Zeitgeist, playing piano and a combination of woodwind and percussion instruments, simply let it run its powerful course. They stored up immense anticipation with the slow, nervously repetitious beginning and middle, then released it all at the conclusion, when the music broke down into a delirious storm of hissing, stomping and yelling.

Far more soothing to the modern spirit, though no less musically challenging for Zeitgeist, was "Doubles III" by Mamuro Fujieda. The three variations in this mildly narcotic minimalist composition from 1986 barely differed, each riding on a bed of gently churning waves from piano, marimba and vibraphone.

Unlike both its fellows on Monday's program, "Night Singing," a new work by Andrew Rindfleisch, encompassed more than one mood. In fact, the score portrayed the range of emotions experienced during a late-night bout of creativity. Rindfleisch, a professor of composition at CSU and music director of the Cleveland Contemporary Players, used four fragments of poetry by Baudelaire as a model.

The members of Zeitgeist introduced themselves Monday night with an avant-garde improvisation session. Like aliens from another planet descended on the CSU stage, the musicians treated their instruments like foreign objects, producing strange ambient sounds and reacting to one another.

Of course, from the concert that followed, it was clear that Zeitgeist is actually quite skilled at playing music on Earth.

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