

The New York Times

New Chamber Music from Lee Hyla

By Anthony Tommasini April 12, 2013

The American composer Lee Hyla has unassailable credentials within both avant-garde and academic circles. He spent his early years playing piano in new-music ensembles, rock bands and free improvisation groups. But he has also been a valued teacher of composition at the New England Conservatory in Boston and, since 2007, Northwestern University.

A new Tzadik recording of recent chamber works, played by the dynamic Firebird Ensemble and conducted by Jeffrey Means, begins with a personal piece called “Polish Folk Songs” (2007) inspired, Mr. Hyla writes in a note, by memories of his grandmother’s funeral in 1973 in the Polish community of Niagara Falls, N.Y., where Mr. Hyla was born. She and her friends used to sing songs of mourning from the old country. Scored for seven players, the music boldly shifts from strands of yearning lyricism to aggressive, slashing chords. Quotations from folk songs, much like people, bump heads one moment and get along the next.

In “Field Guide” (2006) Mr. Hyla has his Messiaen moment. This 10-minute score takes its thematic materials from bird song. But whereas Messiaen went into the fields in search of singing birds, Mr. Hyla relied on ornithological recordings. The music captures the assertiveness of many birdcalls, the delicacy of others, all folded into a restless yet cohesive score.

The title work of the album, “My Life on the Plains” (2010), takes its name from the autobiography of George Armstrong Custer. This 30-minute work begins with staggered entrances, searching yet nervous, by individual instruments. A series of duos and trios follow, but you never trust the calm passages, rightly, since frenetic intensity keeps coming. A haunting slow movement leads to a wild frenzied finale. Here Mr. Hyla’s young experimental days come to the fore, though the writing is masterly.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/arts/music/new-chamber-music-from-lee-hyla.html>

The Boston Globe

From Hyla to Mahler, Beethoven to Schoenberg

By Jeremy Eichler April 20, 2013

MY LIFE ON THE PLAINS-Music by Lee Hyla

(Tzadik)

Boston's loss was Chicago's gain in 2007, when the ruggedly original composer Lee Hyla moved from his longtime perch at New England Conservatory to a new post at Northwestern University. Fortunately the musical ties forged here over the decades are still paying dividends, as is evidenced by this excellent new disc, "My Life on the Plains," featuring Boston's own Firebird Ensemble in expert performances of three recent works. Jeffrey Means conducts.

Hyla's music generally blends a breed of modernist rigor with the aggressive energy of rock and the soul of free jazz. Moments of arresting beauty are given but they are hard won. As demonstrated in the cannily linked three movements of the title work from 2010, Hyla's craft has a density of construction that rewards careful listening, but it's also generous with its visceral pleasures, delivered here through the sinew of the string lines, the elegant swoop of the clarinets, and the physicality of the solo piano writing that, near the end, seems to channel the upwelling ferocity of a Cecil Taylor improvisation.

Hyla's "Field Guide" from 2006 is a shorter work full of angular yet soulful music woven from the transmuted calls of an Australian lyrebird, a Peruvian wren, even an extinct Hawaiian Kauai-oo. And the opening 2007 work, "Polish Folk Songs," conjures and recombines actual folk materials into three surging, intensely felt movements by turns ceremonial, madcap, and elegiac, with both keening dissonances and sudden vistas of striking stillness. Firebird plays throughout with all the virtuosity and grit this music requires. And then some.

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/music/2013/04/20/reviews-recently-released-classical-music-cds/EeEkAcNIGPcRIWDYx8WAzI/story.html>

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THE NEW YORKER

Classical Notes: Close Encounters

by Russell Platt April 1, 2013

John Zorn's Tzadik label has never courted celebrity. Its catalogue consists largely of albums by talented avant-garde composers who don't naturally seek the limelight, and that's a welcome philosophy. A great example is Annie Gosfield, whose fourth disk for the label, "Almost Truths and Open Deceptions," underscores the wisdom of Zorn's long-term investment. Gosfield has a deep heritage in the Lower East Side, where her immigrant grandparents toiled in low-wage jobs decades ago. She claims a "junk dealer's ingenuity" in making music from unlikely combinations of sound sources; her album is a feisty family argument of rhythm and timbre. In the opening selection, "Wild Pitch," the gnarled textures of Felix Fan's cello solos go up against hard-driving piano and percussion, while the album's title track is a kind of chamber concerto in which Fan makes his plangent case amid a more expansive instrumental context that includes his string-playing colleagues in the Flux Quartet and Blair McMillen's microtonal piano. The relentless pacing of both works is driven by an insistent rock beat. (Gosfield left New York long enough to enjoy a stint in the punk clubs of Los Angeles in the eighties.) In "phantom Shakedown," Gosfield's mechanistic piano playing—John Cage by way of Danny Elfman—competes excitedly with processed sounds of a grinding cement mixer and a broken-down shortwave radio.

Gosfield's pieces, driven by strong instrumental protagonists, stake their claim to a unique world—she's a glorious provincial, the Carl Nielsen of Second Avenue. In contrast, Lee Hyla, a distinguished veteran academic, seems to yearn for a world not of his own making—the suburbs of Vienna, where the ghosts of Berg and Webern still lurk. It's a classic predicament for a postwar American composer to have, one that Hyla, on his new album, "My Life on the Plains" (also on Tzadik), solves by forcing his post-Expressionist paradise to interface with sounds derived from personal experience, such as the Niagara Falls of his childhood ("Polish Folk Songs"), the treasury of North American birdsong ("Field Guide"), and the vast empty stretches of Wyoming (the title composition). These intense chamber symphonies sometimes have a hard jazz swing to them, but the most abiding impression is that of lustrous, lyrical melancholy; the Firebird Ensemble performs them not only with expertise but with the sympathy of devoted colleagues.

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/recordings/2013/04/01/130401gore_GOAT_recordings_platt

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

A blog about new classical music, art, and technology.

Lee Hyla: My Life on the Plains on Tzadik

By Matt Mendez April 4, 2013

One should know about all the structures of fantasy and the fantasies of structures, and mix surprise and enigma, magic and shock, intelligence and abandon, form and antiform.

Thus spake Stefan Wolpe in a masterful, Dada-inflected 1959 lecture entitled “Thinking Twice.” Lee Hyla would have been seven when it was delivered: probably a tad too young to appreciate its gnomic wisdom. Nor, for that matter, did Hyla get the chance to study with Wolpe, who died in 1972 having never fully received his due. Yet of all the composers to have come along on the American scene in Wolpe’s wake, Hyla has arguably done the most to carry the Wolpean torch, to further the German émigré’s project of marrying openminded eclecticism with total artistic integrity, of fusing the untrammled freedom of improvisation with the resilient objectivity of aesthetic reason. Hyla, who was formerly active as a free jazz pianist, made this debt plain early on by quoting Wolpe’s Chamber Piece No. 1 in his breakthrough work, 1984’s *Pre-Pulse Suspended*, and if his music has never drawn directly on Wolpe’s idiosyncratic twelve-tone technique (as is the case with, say, Charles Wuorinen), its spirit has always informed Hyla’s output. From their garrulous, aggressive gesturality to their interest in transmuting opposites into simultaneities (*Trans*: the title of one of Hyla’s chamber orchestra pieces) and their intuitive sense of *le ton juste*, the affinities between the two are many and striking. And while none of this is to say that Hyla isn’t very much his own man — the rockist edge and resolute avoidance of intellectual ostentation are among the music’s more endearing traits — the analogy with a Wolpe is particularly apt since Hyla tallies with no school, bows before no trends, and has no real followers. A true American original, he’s difficult to contextualize other than by reference to another one-of-a-kind figure: like Wolpe, Hyla treads a lonely path, always following the courage of his artistic convictions, even if it means some will mistakenly label him a “composer’s composer.”

Hyla’s new portrait disc, *My Life on the Plains*, contains all the Wolpean awareness of “the structures of fantasy and the fantasies of structures” we’ve come to expect from the current Northwestern University professor, but now newly leavened with a welcome dose of easygoing lightness — a canny choice on Hyla’s part. Some of this is a function of the instrumentation: the three pieces featured here are for “modified pierrot ensemble” (all add an extra viola to the now-standard sextet, while *My Life on the Plains* and *Polish Folk Songs* also swap a second clarinet for the customary flute), a combination that can grate on the ears if the composer isn’t careful. The solution: instead of treating the ensemble as a thumbnail orchestra, focus on its flexibility, dexterity, and unique capacity for intricate counterpoints. Another possible hint comes by way of the title, also that of the disc’s longest composition: inspired by time spent in Wyoming, the echt-East-coast Hyla appears increasingly willing here to entertain lengthy prairies of breathing room and “empty” space. While Hyla speaks of “wanting to push the performers a bit into areas where they might not ordinarily live,” such a statement applies just as well to his own compositional practice in *My Life on the Plains*. Accordingly, the work’s second movement, with its hazy clouds of flageolets and its well-judged shifts in harmonic tension, completely refutes the common image of Hyla as the doyen of hyper-caffeinated punk-brutalism.

Not that Hyla has abandoned his former gritty muscularity completely: his favorite instrument, the bass clarinet, features here heavily in its “wailing” upper register, often in drunken counterpoint with its higher-pitched cousin. Or there’s the demented, schizophrenic piano solo (shades of Cecil Taylor) that interrupts the final movement of *My Life on the Plains*, providing one of the disc’s most memorable moments, as rendered by

keyboardist Sarah Bob. Indeed, Hyla's trademark rock riffs pervade all three pieces, most idiosyncratically so in *Field Guide*. The piece is a lively potpourri of birdsong, though with its sharply etched contours and highly dramatic pacing, it couldn't be more different from the ornithological experiments of a Messiaen. A pounding rhythm filched from a Donovan song constantly butts in (or is it just a particularly insistent woodpecker?), acting as a repeated reminder of human presence. In this sense, the down-to-earth *Field Guide* proves a suggestive response to the French master: Hyla's bewildered birdwatcher, Audubon guide in hand, would never have been granted admission into any of Messiaen's celebrations of Creation and its sublime chaos, all of which were written from a transcendental perspective shorn of any concern for the trivial considerations of man.

If I've yet to say anything about *Polish Folk Songs*, it's because I'm still working to wrap my head around this extraordinarily affecting, incredibly imaginative score. Initially inspired by the old world Polish chants Hyla first heard years ago at his grandmother's funeral, it draws on the rustic music of the Tatra Mountain region — also the source for the folkloristic works of Szymanowski, Bacewicz, and Górecki. Yet the miracle of Hyla's piece is that it's hardly a mere retread of these composers' midcentury investigations. With its surrealistic jump-cuts — the distinctive, plangent Tatra fiddle melodies are constantly rubbing shoulders with the poppy strains of Chicago-style polkas and a pair of wheezing melodicas standing in for a concertina — *Polish Folk Songs* may have been more instructively titled *Poland, as Imagined by David Lynch*. That said, the piece works in spite of its decidedly quirky surface charms (viz. the melodicas), most notably thanks to a churchy chorale-snatch played on electric organ, which serves throughout as a refrain. A welcome island of calm in the midst of the continual irruptions of subconscious musical memory, it helps ground this uniquely moving slice of cultural autobiography.

The Firebird Ensemble, a group of some of Boston's finest new music players, have worked closely with Hyla on this music for years, and it certainly shows. Ideally caught by Tzadik in these recordings, their dynamic performances provide a welcome snapshot of a still all-too-frequently overlooked composer.

Lee Hyla, *My Life on the Plains* (Tzadik #8093, January 2013)

<http://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2013/04/lee-hyla-my-life-on-the-plains-on-tzadik/#more-7487>

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW; Instruments In All Kinds Of Groupings

By ALLAN KOZINN January 31, 2003

The Firebird Ensemble, a young group from Boston, made its New York debut with an ambitious and eclectic program on Wednesday evening at Elebash Hall, the attractive recital space at the CUNY Graduate Center. Like many groups of its kind, Firebird draws on a fairly large complement of performers so that just about any combination of instruments is possible. Even so, much of the program focused more firmly on individual strengths within the ensemble.

Rafael Popper-Keizer, the group's cellist, opened the program with "Triage" (2002), a work of his own for solo cello. Harmonically conservative but full of energy and coloristic variety, the score showed Mr. Popper-Keizer to be imaginative in both his capacities and possessed of a solid technique and a warm sound.

Sarah Bob, the ensemble's pianist, took a solo turn in Curtis K. Hughes's "Avoidance Tactics No. 1" (2001), a fiery work for piano and tape. Building on Henry Cowell's tone-cluster writing, Mr. Hughes had Ms. Bob pounding the keys vigorously, often with her forearm, but within the din there were some great moments of interaction between the keyboard and the taped and electronically altered percussion sounds.

Lee Hyla's "In Double Light" (1983) for viola, bass clarinet, piano and percussion is a study in balances: often the ensemble is divided into duets, holding simultaneous but rhythmically interlocking conversations. And Luciano Berio's "Naturale" (1985) is an idiosyncratic viola and percussion dialogue, sometimes abstract, sometimes engagingly folkish, with a taped Sicilian folksong occasionally joining the texture. The work was presented in a choreographed version, danced by Kindra Windish.

The group's strengths as an ensemble were most evident in Juliana Trivers's "Cauldron of Morning" (2001), a setting of Sylvia Plath poems linked by brief instrumental interludes. Ms. Trivers's sensitivity to the text yielded appealingly dark vocal lines, and the instrumental scoring for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello and bass often magnified Plath's peculiar emotional world with a directness that matched and at times surpassed the vocal writing. Especially striking was a stark duet for violin and clarinet that connected the first two poems, "November Graveyard" and "Lorelei." Jessica Bowers, the mezzo-soprano, wavered around pitches slightly, but seemed to feel the texts.

The full ensemble performed Earle Brown's "December 1952," a graphic score (that is, the musical text is a series of horizontal and vertical lines of varied thicknesses and spacing) that demands an improvisatory spirit. The ensemble took to the aisles for the performance, surrounding the audience and encouraging listeners to add noises of their own.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/31/movies/music-review-instruments-in-all-kinds-of-groupings.html>

Firebird Ensemble: Tapestry by David Cleary / March 2005

The Firebird Ensemble's final presentation of the season was entitled "Tapestry." On Sunday night's concert, your reviewer encountered an enchanting carpet woven from musical fibers culled from all across Asia .

The four movements heard of Reza Vali's *Folk Songs, Set No. 9* (1991) are based on Persian vernacular material as well as Vali's original tunes written in that style. It's very much to the composer's credit that one can't tell the difference between the two. Vali's handling of the melodies, while simple (employing canons or sparse accompaniments often built from ostinati) is engrossing. This flute and cello duo is a fine listen. Scored for oud (Arabic lute), violin, and percussion, *Sama'i Hijazkar* (2004) by Syrian-born Kareem Roustom comes across as an authentic Middle Eastern musical experience. The piece employs Arabic scales rife with quarter tones, a Turkish formal structure often used in music accompanying Whirling Dervishes, plenty of heterophonic melody elaboration, and sections where the oud and violin improvise on earlier material. Exotic and pleasing to hear.

Chinese idioms permeate the otherwise Atlantic Coast oriented cello/piano/percussion trio *Qi* (1997) by Chen Yi. But there's no plum blossom fragility here-intense, energetic material leaps from the pages of this compelling and well-made piece. Shirish Korde's *Nesting Cranes* (2004) also demonstrates a mating of East and Eastern Seaboard, though here the Asian elements draw from several sources, suggesting places as far apart as Indonesia and Japan . The writing for both flute and string quartet is multihued and gorgeous, and musical material is handled with utmost craftiness.

Especially eclectic in its influences, *Varied Trio* (1987) by Lou Harrison snitches elements not just from Northern India and Bali but from various European sources as well. Yet somehow, it all fits together, nicely harnessed to Harrison 's genial yet persuasive aesthetic vision. Percussionist, violinist, and pianist get their chance to shine, showcasing the composer's fine ear for long-spun yet engaging lines. Judging from his string quartet *Turk Kuarteti* (n.d .), the little-known Turkish composer Ekrem Zeki Un (1910-1987) deserves much wider recognition. This unusual selection, with its restlessly changing meters, craggy phrasing, ostinato textures, and raw folk-like speech (here laced with microtones) suggests a Middle Eastern updating of Leos Janacek and Bela Bartok . It's wonderfully vital and unique fare.

With this concert, the Firebird Ensemble confirmed its status as one of Boston 's elite new music groups. One should single out Alicia DiDonato's splendidly versatile flute playing in *Nesting Cranes* , David Russell's flamboyantly forceful cello performance in *Qi* , and Katherine Winterstein's delightfully effective violin turn in *Varied Trio* , but all the musicians who took the stage-the aforementioned plus Rohan Gregory (violin), Tali Morgulis (piano), Bob Schulz (percussion), Kate Vincent (viola, ensemble director), and Roustom (oud)-acquitted themselves handsomely.

If this event were indeed a rug, it would be a treasured heirloom assuming a place of honor in a world-class museum. This was without doubt one of the most adventurous and well-executed Boston-area new music concerts of the season.

The Boston Globe

Unusual 'Scrooge' is a triumph

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | December 19, 2005

Firebird Ensemble

At: Emmanuel Church, Saturday

The holiday season's most offbeat musical event, Firebird Ensemble's performance of Jon Deak's "The Passion of Scrooge," proved to be one of the most captivating. Baritone Aaron Engebretson turned in one of the most brilliant performances of the season Saturday afternoon in Emmanuel Church, and so did the Firebird Ensemble, augmented for the occasion by seven additional instrumentalists.

Deak, a bass player in the New York Philharmonic, has created an astonishing boozy fruitcake in "The Passion of Scrooge" -- it's as if he crossed Peter Maxwell Davies' tart music-theater piece "Eight Songs for a Mad King" with a sugar plum by Leroy Anderson. The energy of the music is prodigious, and it swiftly shuttles among many disparate styles with disarming aplomb.

A solo singer serves as the narrator of Dickens's famous tale and takes the roles of all the characters -- male, female, alive, and dead. Each of the characters has an instrumental counterpart in the chamber ensemble, and the musicians also sing, mutter, click their tongues, and create howling-wind effects. Percussionist Aaron Trant seemed to especially enjoy clanking the chains of Marley's ghost.

Engebretson's performance was a triumph, resonantly sung over the entire range of his voice, vigorously and variously characterized. The playing of the instrumentalists, energetically coordinated by conductor Chris Kim, was first-rate, and the musicians really got into their multitasking.

David Russell began the afternoon with a lively performance of some ingenious variations on "Lo, How A Rose E'er Blooming" for solo cello by Mark Summer, and there was a sensational encore after "Scrooge." "A Not So Traditional Christmas Medley" for strings by Cameron Wilson presents familiar melodies in alien but amusing styles -- "Let It Snow" as a tango, "Away in a Manger" as country and western song. A sinister gypsy version of "Jingle Bells" sounded as if the one-horse open sleigh were headed straight for the castle of Count Dracula. This, too, was superbly played.

In the free-spirited Firebird Ensemble, Boston has its equivalent to such prominent, genre-busting new-music ensembles as Eighth Blackbird or Alarm Will Sound. Firebird's next concert, in February, will be performed at the barbecue restaurant Redbones; it's called "Meat the Composer."

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2005/12/19/unusual_scrooge_is_a_triumph/

The Boston Globe

Firebird adds some spice to hot venue

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | February 15, 2006

SOMERVILLE -- "This is better than Carnegie Hall," observed Kate Vincent, director of the Firebird Ensemble, looking around at her satisfied public in the basement of Redbones Barbecue in Davis Square Monday night. There is nothing like a plate of ribs to put an audience in a good mood, and they don't serve them at Carnegie Hall.

Playing a concert at Redbones fulfilled a longtime wish of Vincent and the Firebird Ensemble, a contemporary-music group dedicated to opening new avenues between living composers and the public, and people liked the idea so much they had to give two performances. For the occasion, Firebird chose a crossover program made up mostly of encore-type pieces and transcriptions -- the only criticism one could make was that this "Meat the Composer" event was stronger on spicy sauces than on real meat. Fred Stadkey made ingenious arrangements of Disturbed's "Remember" and Rage Against the Machine's "Know Your Enemy," and David Claman turned out a terrific arrangement of Jimi Hendrix's "Long Hot Summer Night"; percussionist Aaron Trant gave his virtuoso take on Frank Zappa's "Black Page."

Today's best young classical players, and the Firebird Ensemble and its guests qualify, have grown up listening to jazz, rock, and pop, and they have no problem playing it: They have the chops, the energy, and the style for it. Someone cried out, "Play 'Freebird!' " and the group had a transcription ready and did just that.

Mimi Rabson, who teaches at Berklee, contributed a couple of clever pieces for string quartet ("Funk # 1" and "King Street Tango," which takes Debussy's theme from "The Afternoon of a Faun" and spins it through some dips, turns, and glides). Elizabeth Brown's cheerful "Party of Two" found Trant playing his part on an electric coffee grinder. The most interesting piece was Ian Clark's "Zoom Tube" for solo flute, a jazzy tune using extended techniques for the instrument (and flutist, who sings along, and uses her tongue to create a rhythm track as well). Alicia Di Donato, whose scarlet velvet top and black leather pants turned heads, gave it a drop-dead performance, fully a match for barbecued brisket.

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2006/02/15/firebird_adds_some_spice_to_hot_venue/?comments=al

The Boston Globe

A meaty blend of jazz and rock

January 24, 2007 | Matthew Guerrieri, Globe Correspondent

SOMERVILLE -- A mistress of Igor Stravinsky once revealed that the composer enjoyed watching zookeepers throw meat to the animals. So Firebird Ensemble's initiative to bring contemporary music to a carnivorous setting is not exactly unprecedented. On Monday night at Redbones, the chamber group served up its second "Meat the Composer" concert, an eclectic program slanted toward rock and pop influences.

First came "King Street Tango," for string quartet and percussion, by Boston-based violinist/violist and Berklee School of Music faculty member Mimi Rabson. Rabson lets recognizable genres encounter interesting visitors: The tango was graced by gypsy strains, while "Funk #1," later in the program, made room for some elegant jazz.

Aaron Trant, who founded the ensemble with violist Kate Vincent and pianist Sarah Bob, was featured as percussionist and composer. Lisa Bielawa's "In the Eye of the Beholder," written for Trant, is one of a series of solo studies by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's composer-in-residence. Trant expertly negotiated a set of Asian gongs and an augmented drum set in a fascinating play of color that never coalesced into an actual piece; Bielawa kept sidling up to a groove, but couldn't quite introduce herself.

Trant's own "Dictit," a study in controlled improvisation that yielded some lovely phrases, was played with panache by violinist Gabriela Diaz and flutist Alicia DiDonato. DiDonato also gave a commanding performance of British flute virtuoso Ian Clarke's "Zoom Tube," but the piece itself, a series of bluesy extended-technique riffs, was more proof-of-concept than artistic statement.

Covers appropriately filled out the concert. Holy Cross professor David Claman's version of Jimi Hendrix's "Long, Hot Summer Night" had intriguing hints of folk and country, but busy counterpoint vitiated the backbeat. More successful were arrangements of Tool's "Vicarious," Disturbed's "Remember," and Rage Against the Machine's "Know Your Enemy" by Fred Sladkey, local wunderkind producer and guitarist for the grunge-metal band Defenestrated. Interlocking eighth-note patterns for the strings, combined with drums and Sladkey's own guitar, rocked hard and consistently.

Finally, soprano Caprice Corona joined the entire group for Jonathan Bailey Holland's transcription of the Brainstorm disco hit "Lovin' Is Really My Game." Holland, a Berklee composition professor, deployed strings and winds in an expert evocation of the '70s, and if Corona couldn't quite disguise her operatic pedigree (shying away from brassiness, her high notes were a little tentative), the evening was buoyed home on a wave of AM-radio good vibrations.

http://articles.boston.com/2007-01-24/ae/29228900_1_strings-percussionist-and-composer-jazz

The Boston Globe

Light touch plays well in this 'Scrooge'

December 11, 2007 | David Weininger, Globe Correspondent

Sure, the season is filled with "Messiahs" and carol sings, but another Yuletide musical tradition is taking hold in Boston, thanks to the Firebird Ensemble: The now-annual performance of "The Passion of Scrooge, or A Christmas Carol" by Jon Deak, a composer who's also a bassist in the New York Philharmonic.

Deak's vivid and theatrical retelling of Dickens's well-worn holiday tale casts a solo baritone in the roles of the narrator, Scrooge, Marley, and a few minor characters. It's a part that requires him to both sing and speak, but his chief duty is to convey Scrooge's sneering curmudgeonliness.

The ensemble - 10 players' worth of strings, winds, and percussion - is less an accompanist than a full-fledged, wisecracking participant in the narrative. Deak writes in a flurry of colorful sound effects that guide the story along - you hear the cold wind that follows Scrooge wherever he goes, and the clatter of noise that heralds the appearance of the Christmas ghosts. The percussionist even rattles a chain when Marley's ghost appears. The players are also called on to whisper, heckle, and (of course) lay out a "Bah humbug" or two in the process.

What this all adds up to is a "Passion" that's highly entertaining but also gets at the essence of Dickens's tale without sliding into mawkish sentimentality. It's a well-crafted piece that's smart enough not to take itself too seriously, and it needs performers who can cope with its musical demands without losing sight of its quirky humor. It's hard to imagine another group doing so as well as the intrepid and energetic Firebirds, who were under the direction of conductor Chris Younghoon Kim. Aaron Engebretson sang beautifully and, more importantly, easily bore the dramatic focus of the entire piece. This is the group's fourth year of offering the "Passion," and I hope it'll be around for many more.

As engaging as "Scrooge" is, though, it was nearly upstaged in entertainment value by the afternoon's brief closer, "A Not-So-Traditional Christmas Medley" by Cameron Wilson. This is a piece for string quintet that refracts beloved holiday songs through the composer's slightly twisted imagination. You've probably never thought about cross-breeding "Jingle Bells" with Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet, but Wilson has, and the result is hilariously cockeyed, as is the entire piece. David Russell, the ensemble's superb cellist, opened the concert by playing a virtuosic series of variations, composed by Mark Summer, of "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming."

http://articles.boston.com/2007-12-11/ae/29231875_1_scrooge-christmas-ghosts-marley

The Boston Globe

Firebird puts new pieces -- and a fresh approach -- on the menu

February 13, 2008 | Music Review, Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff

SOMERVILLE - When classical programs are called "meaty," it typically suggests they include a lot of substantial repertoire, and not per se that the music is served up with large portions of barbecue and hushpuppies. But that was exactly the case on Monday night, when the Firebird Ensemble performed in a low-slung basement space at Redbones BBQ in Davis Square. Tuxedos and poker-faces were checked at the door. Percussionist Aaron Trant played near a big picture of a pig with a surfboard.

None of it was as shocking as it might have been a decade ago. The indie classical music scene is thriving these days, as more and more conservatory-trained musicians seek out new audiences and new venues where tradition weighs less heavily. This is the third time that Firebird has made the inspired pairing of barbecue and adventurous classical music under the title of "Meat the Composer."

The crowd was surprisingly sparse at the first of the ensemble's two sets, possibly thanks to the early start time of 6 p.m. Rane Moore opened with an enthralling performance of Lee Hyla's "Mythic Birds of Saugerties," a soulful modernist paean to the birds of upstate New York, for solo bass clarinet. Next came Jacob Ter Veldhuis's "Lipstick," an entertaining if rather thin piece that layers quick and jaunty flute runs (played with virtuosity and lavish care by Sarah Brady) on top of a pre-recorded tape with looped and scrambled voices from the Jerry Springer TV show, a French psychiatrist, and Billie Holiday.

Violist (and Firebird artistic director) Kate Vincent then deftly tossed off a new work from Lisa Bielawa's Synopsis series called "I Don't Even Play the Bassoon." It riffs imaginatively on the opening solo from "The Rite of Spring," its title apparently referring to Bielawa's own anxiety dream. Trant's "It's Over" and "Song 4" both placed a spotlight on Rohan Gregory's freewheeling fiddle playing and marked a departure into the Latin, jazz, and heavy metal-influenced territory of the rest of the set, consisting mostly of guitarist Fred Sladkey's string-friendly arrangements of songs by Tool, Todd Rundgren, Breaking Benjamin, and Metallica. Violinist Gabby Diaz joined Gregory to provide some refreshingly un-soupy string texture, and David Russell's assertive cello playing both anchored and propelled the bass lines. Sarah Bob was a suavely understated presence on keyboard, and Sarah Brindell made a cameo on vocals for Jonathan Holland's free-spirited arrangement of a vintage Womack/Woods disco number.

These sets can be a tricky balancing act and this one, in a departure for Firebird, leaned a bit heavily on the arrangements. It also might have benefited from a host or emcee. But the ensemble is clearly honing an approach with a lot of potential. The relaxed atmosphere breeds a sorely needed openness to experiment, and a sense that newness need not be stigmatized as such. It helps of course that the point of comparison here for a new work is not Brahms but Breaking Benjamin, and that the listeners appear more concerned with pulled pork than posterity. The musicians, meanwhile, are quite obviously having a blast, which is also not a bad place to begin.

http://articles.boston.com/2008-02-13/ae/29272187_1_classical-music-string-todd-rundgren

The Boston Globe

New-music fest opens with flourish

September 20, 2008 | Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff

The inaugural Ditson Festival of Contemporary Music kicked off Thursday night at the Institute of Contemporary Art. It appears to be the first time that the local new-music scene has had anything quite like it: eight concerts over four days with performances by most of the city's resident ensembles and a few outside guests. Rounding up all those groups under one roof appears to have been a daunting logistical feat, but in theory, it's exactly what the scene needs to pull it together and increase its profile.

Getting the festival off the ground did require an infusion of outside support from the Ditson Fund at Columbia University. At the moment, Ditson plans to throw a new-music party in a different city every other year. Boston was chosen as the first, in part thanks to its vibrant new-music community.

The full generational range of that community was on display Thursday night, with the early-evening performance by the Firebird Ensemble, a group launched in 2001, and an 8 p.m. performance by Boston Musica Viva, a veteran ensemble founded some 40 years ago, before most of the Firebird players were even born.

All told, it was a night of high-quality performances and a slightly low-energy atmosphere. (A rousing welcome from festival curator Gil Rose might have helped set the tone, but Rose, never one to hog the spotlight, chose to avoid it altogether.) Firebird opened its program with Curtis Hughes's "Danger Garden," an animated piece full of sharply contrasting ideas that Hughes mischievously hurls together and watches how they collide. Mario Davidovsky's "Flashbacks" by contrast evoked a fractured landscape of memories but did so with remarkable precision, clarity, and timbral control.

Clarinetist Rane Moore gave a sensitive and nimble rendition of Elliott Carter's "Gra," a solo exercise in spiky modernist virtuosity, before Firebird concluded its set with Lee Hyla's richly expressive "Polish Folk Songs," full of actual folk material that gets an abstract but earthy treatment. The Firebird players seemed to relax into this work, and gave it some of their most committed and enjoyably freewheeling playing of the night.

Hyla's piece was written for Boston Musica Viva, so it served as a fine segue to the second part of the evening. BMV music director Richard Pittman opened with the premiere of Julie Rohwein's atmospheric "Borne on the Wind," and proceeded to Gunther Schuller's utterly charming "Four Vignettes," with its first movement full of glassy harmonics and wispy flute gestures that flicker like flames.

Ronald Perera's "Three Poems of Günter Grass" used tape and imaginative ensemble writing to vividly conjure the melancholy and anguish of life in postwar Germany. "Tracer" by Richard and Deborah Cornell was a multimedia work that never quite found the right balance between music and video. The night ended with "Twilight Colors," Chou Wen-Chung's peaceful if slightly monochromatic evocation of the evening sky over the Hudson Valley. Pittman and his crew gave sensitive and assured performances throughout. The festival's momentum and intensity will likely build through the weekend. Concerts run through tomorrow.

http://articles.boston.com/2008-09-20/ae/29273880_1_new-music-lee-hyla-gil-rose

Concert Review: Firebird Ensemble and Boston Musica Viva at the Institute of Contemporary Art

By [C. Fernsebner](#) in [Arts & Events](#)

September 21, 2008

Firebird Ensemble, based in Somerville and outfitted like an accomplished H&M ad in black and red and sparkling knitwear, opened the Ditson Festival of Contemporary Music on Thursday night. They began with a darkly animated piece that sounded like a fit night of half-sleep in a bed of swaying strings, heckled by lonely trills of from a flute and the footsteps of a piano that approached like a serial killer. Never has sudden bongoning sounded more ominous to Bostonist's ears. (Leafing through the program after the fact, we saw that the composer, Curtis Hughes, has titled it, in lowercase, "danger garden".)

Firebird Ensemble is always a pleasure to hear, and to watch, playing with crazy precision that made parts of Mario Davidovsky's "Flashbacks" seem like a series of physical actions and reactions, percussion knocking into piano and rippling out through violin, obedient to the laws of physics.

The oldest pieces in the festival program were written in the forties, and many of the composers are alive and local and on hand to take their bows. Lee Hyla came out to explain the genesis of his composition while Firebird (down one cellist due to imminent childbirth) rearranged themselves. "Polish Folk Songs" (2007) had its genesis in his confrontation, as a young "hardcore modernist," with the beauty and emotional pull of folk singing at his grandmother's funeral, and a subsequent joyride through the Tatra Mountains. The result is a bright, unpredictable bumper-car floor of folk tunes, sometimes uniting mournfully, and movingly, before dissolving into the fray again or switching to warm, fuzzy organ between movements with the abruptness of a cinematic cut.

Between shows, Bostonist saw the ICA's [glowing blue unisex restrooms](#) and, waiting in an echoing antechamber on the third floor, studied the diverse array of shoes: loafers, sneakers, ornate wingtips, Birkenstocks with intensely red socks, and the tallest, most scifi Fluevog boots we've ever seen on a human before. We caught a brief glimpse of the moonlit harbor before opaque black shades were brought down over the glass walls of the auditorium. This was, perhaps, because one of the pieces to be performed by Boston Musica Viva, Richard & Deborah Cornell's "Tracer" (2003) called for a projected video that, conductor Richard Pittman explained, had been initially conceived as a video game. Lacking joysticks, we travelled on autopilot through a chunkily-rendered snowglobe of transparent .gif pictograms.

Ronald Perera's pensive "Three Poems of Günter Grass" (1947) necessitated another odd sight: a black box, slumped in a chair like a sullen guest musician, that was called upon to play musique concrète loops of poetry and Nuremberg soundbites. Only the first poem's German text and English translation was tucked into the programs, but mezzo-soprano Pamela Dellal sang and spoke with an gorgeous intensity that left language barriers shaken if not quite overcome.

Boston Music Viva also performed Gunther Schuller's much more recent "Four Vignettes" (2007), which started airy and light and seemed to turn into an unidentified cassette tape played backwards at high speed, and premiered Julie Rohwein's moody and somewhat disjointed-feeling "Borne on the Wind" (2008). After hearing a lot of new work back to back, the uninitiated listener can be excused for thinking that it all starts to sound like

a xylophone falling down the stairs. (This Bostonist, at least, hopes to be excused.) The economy of the evening's final piece was, then, a relief: Chou Wen-Chung's "Twilight Colors" (2007) proceeded carefully, building a landscape with slow washes and cautious echoes.

http://bostonist.com/2008/09/21/concert_review_new_music_at_the_ica.php

The Boston Globe

Firebird Ensemble feeds off the written word

December 09, 2009 | Matthew Guerrieri, Globe Correspondent

MEDFORD - The romantic idea that music begins where language leaves off is, like most romantic ideas, a seductive simplification. The Firebird Ensemble's Monday night concert at Tufts University offered a more nuanced picture: four new works, each implicitly or explicitly referencing the written word.

The first two came courtesy of Tufts graduate students, the culmination of a Firebird residency. Roberto Toscano's ". . . and if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you" curates a grab-bag of Friedrich Nietzsche aphorisms, although, while soprano Aliana de la Guardia was tasked with much wordless, sinuous singing, the words themselves were spoken, an oddly prosaic touch. With a string duo and bowed percussion, Toscano engineered an expanded metallic scrape, drawn out for the duration: a one-note piece, but that note arresting and atmospheric.

Justin Tierney's "The God Script" sets Jorge Luis Borges's tale of an imprisoned Aztec priest trying to discern divine revelation in a jaguar's spots; Tufts drama professor Laurence Senelick narrated over an eight-player ensemble. Tierney's dark-hued music had polished, ominous richness, though the music was largely reactive; Senelick (giving an excellent reading, committed and wry) often introduced a section on his own, the players then confirming the mood, not establishing it. And cinematic literalness occasionally worked against the story, clearing the original's liminal haze between faith and hallucination. But the sound-worlds were cogent and immediate. The performance (with Jeffrey Means conducting) was superb, robust, and grand.

Firebird's fall season has featured two composers from opposite coasts, Pennsylvania-based Eric Moe and Californian Donald Crockett; Monday featured adept renditions of commissions that the group premiered back in October. Moe's "Frozen Hours Melt Melodiously Into the Past" reworks Richard Wilbur settings, translating the vocal line for cello solo (David Russell, sonorous and panoramic), a quintet of players filling out the music. Moe's trellis of chromatic, yearning counterpoint was a frame for impressionistic cascades, clanging storms, and inner, concentrated lyricism.

That sort of reserved lyricism also marked Crockett's "to airy thinness beat" (title and mood drawing on John Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"), a loose-limbed chamber concerto featuring Firebird's artistic director, violist Kate Vincent. Her stream-of-consciousness line in the opening movement gently ricocheted among the other six musicians. The second movement is sharper, aggressively hesitant; the finale juxtaposes both moods. Crockett's sounds ring bright, even in ruminative softness, an insistent resonance. The poetry remained unspoken, but the interaction still sparked.

http://articles.boston.com/2009-12-09/ae/29266502_1_music-mood-eric-moe

The Boston Globe

Hyla in town with his ‘Life on the Plains’

Composer’s new piece touched by the West

October 01, 2010 | David Weininger, Globe Correspondent

Lee Hyla’s new piece written for Boston’s Firebird Ensemble is called “My Life on the Plains,” and at first blush the title seems like a bit of a goof. “My Life on the Plains,” after all, is the title of George Armstrong Custer’s autobiography, and Hyla is a composer who’s rooted himself in urban centers like Boston and Chicago. Not necessarily the guy you’d link to anything to do with cowboys and Indians.

But like his music, he is good for a surprise or two. “I’ve always been kind of a George Custer, Little Bighorn nut,” says Hyla from his Chicago home. And the title turned out to be appropriate, since most of the material for the new piece was written during a 2009 residency at the Ucross Foundation, an artists’ retreat in Wyoming located about 50 miles from Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. The battleground is “one of the most beautiful places — you really do feel a kind of presence there,” Hyla says.

The Firebird Ensemble premieres “My Life on the Plains” Monday at the Longy School of Music, on a program that also includes Hyla’s “Polish Folk Songs” and music by Thomas Adès and Pierre Jalbert. (The program will repeat the following Friday at the City University of New York.) It’s one of a number of the composer’s works — including “Warble,” for flute and piano, and “Mother Popcorn Revisited,” for piano trio — that have been premiered here since he left Boston for Northwestern University in 2007.

But the new piece is the largest new work to be heard in Boston in recent years, providing a convenient opportunity to catch up with a man who was an undergraduate at New England Conservatory in the 1970s and on its faculty from 1992 until his decampment. He was, in other words, a quintessential Boston composer.

“I had a special relationship [there],” Hyla says. “I’d open my office door, I’d see [pianist] Steve Drury walk by, [violinist] Kim Kashkashian had an office down the hall, so did [jazz singer] Dominique Eade. . . . So we’ve missed people there.” He says it’s been fascinating to make the transition from a conservatory to a large research university, where many of his undergraduate students are double majors: “They’re deeply involved with Russian history, physics, mathematics. So it’s an incredibly diverse intellectual community.”

The cities’ music scenes are different, too — at least the new-music cultures. In Boston, Hyla explains, “almost all the new music groups have been around for a very long time — they’re kind of venerable.” Whereas in Chicago, “the oldest new-music groups are probably something like 10 years old. It’s less entrenched in a certain respect.”

http://articles.boston.com/2010-10-01/ae/29329893_1_plains-piano-trio-hyla

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Music Meets Physics at Harvard

by Peter Van Zandt Lane

October 31, 2010

Firebird Ensemble performed a program of Murail, Saariaho, Grisey, and Satoh at the The Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments at Harvard University on Thursday evening, October 28 (the concert was also presented Wednesday). The venue featured some interesting visuals from a spectrograph being projected throughout the concert. Also on display were sirens and various historical instruments related to the physics of sound. All of the pieces accompanying the exhibit, *Sensations of Tone: wave physics and the creative arts* are, in some way, profoundly connected to physical aspects of sound, generally in ways which integrate technology.

The performances were supplemented by panel discussions between pieces. Panelists on Thursday included composer Alex Rehding and science historians Jimena Canales and Myles Jackson. While each of the discussions was informative and interesting, I think most would have preferred the traditional format: panel discussions and presentations pre-concert, with uninterrupted music. Murail's *Treize couleurs du soleil couchant*, a landmark composition in the establishing of the spectralist aesthetic, shifts through thirteen coloristic musical frames. The only electronic manipulation used in the piece involves adjustments in the level of amplification and slight changes to the reverberant space of individual instruments. The resulting effect, however, is wildly more electronic sounding. In particular, there is an enormous demand on the part of the flautist. Jessi Rosinski's level of control and musicality was quite remarkable, and brought a heightened level of cohesion to the textures masterfully orchestrated by Murail.

Kaija Saariaho's *Lonh* was the most recently composed piece on the program (1996). Saariaho, who is largely influenced by the music of spectralists Murail and Grisey, explores various timbres of the soprano voice in this piece. Jane Sheldon's potent, forceful voice was a perfect match for this piece. The live electronic manipulation diffused haunting timbres around the room, shifting in and out of the dense texture of the voice. Whispers bounced around the speakers, while crystalline strands of Sheldon's immaculately controlled upper register dissipated into impossibly transforming acoustical spaces. The narrative of the piece is beautifully handled, and the performance was convincing.

Grisey's *Prologue* takes a solo viola on a long-winded linear journey from a fairly simple sequence of pitches towards noise (sub-tones and bow-screaching). The program notes describe the piece as a study in the timbral limits of a single instrument, though I found the actual timbral limits of this piece to be fairly limited. The repetitive, slowly varying nature of the piece allowed for little expressive use of the instrument's acoustic and dynamic possibilities. Instead, the repetitive music integrates microtones (derived from the harmonic series), which elicited some interesting moments. While Nathaniel Farny gave an accurate and motivated performance of the very difficult and technically demanding music, the piece was quite one-dimensional, and at times rather dull.

The Heavenly Spheres are Illuminated By Lights by Japanese composer Somei Satoh featured some fine playing by percussionist Aaron Trant and pianist Cory Smythe and some more great singing by soprano Jane Sheldon. The piece was characterized by a number of truly beautiful textures and took a very different aesthetic approach from the other pieces on the program. The piece undoubtedly has, due to its minimalist influence and generally consonant set of sound environments, a much wider appeal. Unfortunately it was a rather short period of time before I got the impression the text was simply marinating in a set of lugubrious, euphoric textures. The music

did little (if anything) interesting after the exposition of these sounds. The result was an unusually long twelve minutes.

Sargasso Arts, the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments at Harvard, and Firebird Ensemble deserve commendation for taking contemporary music into a new and interesting venue. While composers like Murail and Grisey have become iconic figures in many ways, their music remains rarely programmed and even more rarely performed well. And despite being presented in an ultra-cerebral environment, much of the music was intriguing and beautiful.

<http://classical-scene.com/2010/10/31/music-meets/>



Allman Brothers get classical makeover

Roll Over, Beethoven By Keith Powers

Wednesday, January 12, 2011

What do a classical quartet, a Cambridge jazz club and the Allman Brothers' "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed" have in common?

A lot, said composer John Morrison, whose reworking of several Allman Brothers tunes highlights the Firebird Ensemble's Friday date at Ryles Jazz Club.

"Rock music carries the classical tradition more than avant garde music does," Medford resident Morrison said. "I really believe that rock and jazz are part of western classical music, not just a branching off."

The Firebird's performance series, "Meet the Composer" (it used to be held at a Somerville rib joint), includes works that not only cut across genre lines, but ignore the lines altogether. Made up entirely of music inspired by jazz and the blues and performed by the classically trained Firebirds - a core ensemble of viola, percussion, cello and piano - the concert is an attempt, in the words of Firebird founder Kate Vincent, "to show that those boundaries don't exist anymore."

"In contemporary America, composers are part of the culture they grew up in," she said by phone from her home in Los Angeles. "New music ceases to be people drawing on a jazz tradition or making references to the blues. It's a case of people writing the music that they love."

Morrison's contributions to the evening are more or less straight transcriptions of Allman Brothers originals, transferring the famous dual guitar lines to different instruments, "but concentrating on the flexibility of the rhythm," he said.

"I did a transcription of 'Whipping Post' a few years ago, and up to then I had never really studied the way the bass line was structured. It's not just a complex bass pattern - it's fluid. It unfolds."

Other pieces on the program include new work by some of the most interesting composers working today, among them recent Pulitzer Prize winner Jennifer Higdon, Libby Larsen, Donald Crockett and Donald Martino. "One of my ideas for this program is that there's something in it for everyone," Vincent said. "I just want to surprise audiences and share the palette of contemporary music. We need to make programming choices that we believe in. Sometimes audiences are suspicious, but contemporary classical music has gotten extremely diverse."

"It's not like rock music has gone off in some direction that will be reabsorbed by classical music," Morrison said. "Classical music will come out on the other side altered, with new elements. I was trained in classical music and came to rock and jazz just as a listener. But I've now discovered even more depth in rock and the blues. It makes me wish I had played guitar when I was growing up."

The Boston Globe

Firebird Ensemble heats up at Longy

MUSIC REVIEW

By **Jeffrey Gantz** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 17, 2011

CAMBRIDGE - “Mythic Beasts: Music of Myth and Imagination” was the title of Firebird Ensemble’s first program of the season, and indeed, the small audience at Longy School’s Pickman Concert Hall was transported, as if on the back of a great roc, to Japan for Eric Guinivan’s “Mie: Caprice for Eight Musicians” (2008), Italy for Andrew Norman’s “The Companion Guide to Rome” (2010), India and Pakistan for the world premiere of Guinivan’s “Avalerion,” and back home for John McDonald’s “Seven Album Leaves” (2011). As for John Orfe’s “Dragon” (1997), well, there be dragons everywhere.

But it was another mythic beast that was the inspiration for “Avalerion,” a piece commissioned for Firebird Ensemble, and a present to the group on its 10th birthday. The avalerion is a firebird-like creature about whom little is known, so in this work - for flute, clarinet, string trio, piano, and two percussionists - Delaware native Guinivan adopted the death-and-rebirth narrative of the phoenix, using Tibetan singing bowls (which were bowed) and other Eastern percussion to complement the Western winds and strings. “Avalerion” began and ended with a melody in the viola, and in between there was a dark and stormy death scene, but it was Amy Advocat’s soaring clarinet that made the piece take flight.

Every composition had a story. “Dragon,” for three percussionists, told a simple one, the beast approaching stealthily by means of brushed cymbals and triangles and occasionally thwacking its tail (the bass drum) before pouncing in an orgy of tam-tams. “Seven Album Leaves” included dedications to two local composers; the best sections were the final two, “Notturnino,” with its evocation of Edward Hopper’s “Nighthawks,” and “Patient Sid,” where Sarah Brady’s flute recalled the hushed stillness of Debussy’s “Syrinx.”

“The Companion Guide to Rome” is actually Norman’s tribute to his nine favorite Roman churches. Written for string trio, the piece begins with some furious bowing and scraping (“Teresa” - the saint’s ecstasy?) and proceeds mostly through stops and starts, with one section (“Ivo”) of extended glissandos. I was sorry that Firebird omitted the ninth and longest section, “Sabina,” which rises from the fragments of what’s gone before. “Mie,” Guinivan’s other composition on the program, takes its name from a kabuki pose of great drama, though the piece itself seems more of an argument between its two E-flat clarinets and its two trombones, with percussion commentary.

Everyone in the Ensemble wore the same colors, flame red and black. The choice suits the group’s style as well as its name: These musicians play with fire.

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