

LIVE REVIEWS

Caught in the act, significant concerts from around the globe.

Edgefest Ann Arbor, MI 10.19-22.2011

On a hot Saturday afternoon in October, in the absurdly close quarters of the Kerrytown Concert House in Ann Arbor, composer-guitarist Joel Harrison paused to say a few words to the audience. For four days every year, Ann Arbor's Edgefest becomes a space beyond space. Harrison's septet was stuffed into one end of a living-room-sized floor with room for less than 100 chairs, but he still managed to squeeze two giants into the room. "I wanted to use modes Olivier Messiaen created," Harrison explained with a grin. "It turns out, some of 'em sound like Thelonious Monk lines."

The live performance of "Search," Harrison's new project, went by way too fast, but so did just about everything else at Edgefest, an annual, week-long, galaxy-in-a-shoebox showcase of free jazz and allied adventurous forms.

There's something about Kerrytown Concert House that makes everything inside bubble. I've just heard Harrison's *Search* disc, but it was hard to enjoy, because I'm spoiled by the memory of hearing the same music when the newly blown glass was glowing and dripping. The music at Edgefest ran an astounding gamut, from Stephen Rush's fragile, candlelit recital of John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* to a roaring phalanx of free-jazz Detroit reedmen and many wonders in between.

This year's theme was "Blending Out: Classical Roots Exposed," a loose bag that left the cats a lot of room to wriggle. On opening night, pianist Sylvie Courvoisier and violinist Mark Feldman played lively duets with a strange mix of tension and comfort that was hard not to chalk up to their husband-and-wife status. There followed a ferocious set from the Tamarindo Trio, with Tony Malaby on tenor and soprano, William Parker on bass and Tom Rainey on percussion, that slowly moved the needle into the red. By the time Malaby worked up a head of steam, he was bugging his eyes out at least two inches, like a grizzly bear, frightening the people in the front row. The more crazed the music became the more vigorously the faithful bobbed their heads

in rhythm, which seemed to me like snapping your fingers to a waterfall, but that's Edgefest. To paraphrase the state motto of Michigan, if you seek a deeper groove, look about you.

By Thursday night, the festival was in danger of seriousness overload. All that intensity, with nary a wink or smile, was turning the magic box into a hermetic locker room. (Nothing can move very far from its spot in cramped, humid Kerrytown, including assorted bodily emanations.) As it happened, one of the more overtly "classical" events of the week cleared the air. Composer/multi-reedman Ned Rothenberg debuted his Clarinet Quintet No. 1 with the Mivos Quartet, beaming a palpable joy, lightness and smiles from the stage, along with fugues and polyphony. When Rothenberg wasn't playing, he closed his eyes, listening to the quartet like a foreman satisfied that the lathes were humming.

Later that night, pianist-composer Lucian Ban and bassist John Hebert tested Kerrytown's spatial limits again with "Enescu Re-Imagined," a roaring, soaring fantasia on the Romanian composer's music with violinists Mat Maneri and Joyce Hammann, trumpeter Ralph Alessi, and tabla player Badal Roy. Spoken word was folded into the mix Friday, when James Cornish's Short Opera Project performed settings of poems by U.S. poet laureate Philip Levine, who was born and raised in Detroit, less than a mile from Cornish's own neighborhood.

After Cornish, multi-woodwind player and composer Vinny Golia and Friends (pianist Tad Weed, saxophonist Gavin Templeton, guitarist Alex Noice, multi-instrumentalist Jon Armstrong and percussionist Andrew Lessman) muscled through a powerful set. Resplendent in white hair and orange scarf, Golia smiled, rolling and biting his tongue like the Joker as he dug his superheated tenor players.

Friday's closer was one of two transcendent solo performances at the festival. Pianist Craig Taborn is a favorite son in Ann Arbor, a University of Michigan alumnus who has frequently performed at Edgefest performer as a sideman. For his solo debut at Kerrytown, he bounded out holding a glass of wine and talking with the audience, but quickly settled into warrior-mystic mode, forehead almost touching the keyboard. He held the audience rapt, by virtue of his stubborn refusal to put any musical packing peanuts or bubble wrap around his

fragile, sharp inventions.

A sleepy Saturday afternoon was an odd time to be manhandled by Faruq Z. Bey's Conspiracy Wind Ensemble, which Bey modestly introduced as "adventurous Detroit wind players" (Mike Carey, Skeeter Shelton, Allen Barnes, and Cassius Richmond). The sound they produced was beyond description, a five-mouthed dragon from a hole in the Earth. Bey augmented one song by reciting his poetry with gruff, melancholy dignity. "This is the mélange," he intoned. "This curious fiefdom that we contest." Bey also showed a wry sense of humor. "This one is almost totally improvised—and it may sound like it," he quipped while introducing a tune.

The house went dark when Stephen Rush, a music professor at University of Michigan, set to work on Cage's delicate interludes and sonatas. To set the mood, Rush walked around the stage lighting dozens of candles before sitting down to the piano. The gesture could have pushed the experience into la-la land, but Rush had the authority to make it make sense. For me, his quietly heroic engagement with exhaustingly beautiful music wove the most memorable spell of the week.

Throughout the festival, a quiet man with a small gray beard, arched eyebrows and a pulsating cranium could be seen in the back row, taking in the colors and forms. When it was time for the festival to close Saturday night, Steve Adams walked to the front of the room, basking in applause with his three bandmates in the ROVA saxophone quartet.

At noon that day, by honorable tradition, Adams and other Edgefest artists led a noisy parade through the upscale-cobblestone Kerrytown neighborhood, followed by fans and fun-seekers. Adams was taken with a 10-year-old kid who marched along with the musicians blasting a tuba. Before the evening ROVA gig, Adams crouched into an admiring pantomime of the youngster. The Ann Arbor connection means a lot to Adams, who spent his formative years there and first heard Sun Ra at 16 in a local coffee house. "I feel a little pride that this is the kind of thing that goes on in my home town," he said.

Without further ado, ROVA roared off on a riveting round of negotiations, interventions and conspiracies, mixing discipline and fire like a parliament of fumaroles in a curious fiefdom. **Lawrence Cosentino**

Top: Vinny Golia and group in Ann Arbor
Bottom: Stephen Rush's piano is prepared for Cage

