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Edgy ensemble adds history to modern mix

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Bent Frequency, a cutting-edge collective founded by some of Atlanta's most talented young musicians, offers the rare chance to hear the best of modern classical music.

On Tuesday at Eyedrum, its "Microscape 3" concert included winners of a composers' competition sponsored by the group; the results highlighted the range of what's out there.

For instance: Jacob Cooper's "[untitled]" took a recording of the "Gaudeamus Introit," part of a Renaissance Mass, and slowed it down, altering the pitches to produce microtonal sounds, which lie between the standard 12 notes.

A small ensemble gradually joined in, with the instruments awkwardly adjusting their pitches to match those on the recording. The majesty of the devotional work still came through, but the slowed tempo and the off-key pitches gave the work a dark edge, introspective and harrowing. Microtonal music can be scary for some people, yet this piece seemed a model of accessibility.

There was also a premiere, Dorothy Hindman's solo percussion work "Tapping the Furnace." Written for Stuart Gerber, it's a piece with a specific narrative: the Sloss Furnaces in Birmingham, now an Alabama arts center, once thrived on forced labor from convicts, mostly African-Americans. Along with the music, there is a text, excerpted from an oral history, which Gerber spouted out in tempo.

The overwhelming sound is that of drum outbursts, patterned in the same numbers as the shifts at the furnace. The patterns and text repeat themselves until, like the laborers, we feel beaten down. Still, there was enjoyment in watching Gerber at work, wielding an array of equipment with consummate skill.

The program also included works unrelated to the competition. One was "Spiegel Im Spiegel" by Arvo Pärt, a well-known Estonian composer now living in Berlin. Pärt was influenced by the music of the Orthodox Church and established a technique he called tintinnabulation, which focuses on a single note at a time.

Helen Kim played sonorous tones on the lower range of the violin, closest to the human voice, evoking the ancient chants. She was accompanied by Lisa Liong, playing ascending patterns on the piano. A sweetly tonal work on the evening's well-choreographed spectrum, the piece became more peaceful, uplifting.

For a jaded New Yorker, the big surprise of this concert was the audience: attentive, relaxed and enthusiastic, with few people over 40. It might have been the location, Eyedrum, an impossibly hip club/gallery. Sitting with all these kids, listening to this music played with such finesse, the future seemed just a little more promising.

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