

Arts alternatives presented aplenty at festival's New Arts, Oasis stages

Veering from the beaten paths of City Stages last weekend, it was possible to find some intriguing arts alternatives. They were indoors — a distinct advantage on a rain-soaked Friday night — and not nearly as loud, although a throbbing bass or whining electric guitar occasionally seeped in from the street to interrupt the mostly acoustical flow.

Here's a smattering of what went on:

► Some acts came from afar — composer Anne LeBaron from California Institute of the Arts, the brass quartet Sotto Voce from Wisconsin, dance improv artist Ann Law from Chattanooga. Most noticeable about the New Arts and Mason Music Oasis stages were the talents of devoted local artists whose presence is often diminished by the big boys at the Alabama Symphony, Alabama Ballet and other arts bastions.

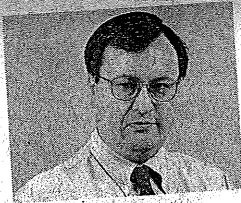
► To get to New Arts, you had to cross Eighth Avenue North to the Birmingham Museum of Art. Sequestered from the main stages in Steiner Auditorium, a potpourri of avant garde and postmodern music, video, theater and various combinations thereof ran for two afternoons. Attendance ranged from 20 to more than 100 as people freely filed in and out.

► On Saturday, Ann Law presented "Solitary Geography," a slow, airy, meditative, and highly engaging improv accompanied by cello. Electric guitarist Andie Nixon hummed and mumbled through three songs in his introverted, very minimal style.

► "Intoxication Tree" was 23 minutes of mostly cliché cathartic ramblings about coming of age and self-discovery. Later the trio December improvised on vibraphone, electric guitar and bass clarinet in a minimalist, repetitious mass of sound.

► Birmingham's new music ambassador Craig Hultgren performed a captivating array of works for cello with video accompaniment, the best of which was Dorothy Hindman's "drowningXnumbers." Intense, gripping, frenetic at times, it held listeners in rapt attention. Leisha Hultgren's video, made after the composition, complemented it well with its series of abstract, filtered and grainy images.

► In the multi-media "Ghost Warrior," Birmingham artists Jill Johnson and SI Reasoning waged war on weeds and ants. Dressed in green leafy costumes, the acting was quite effective at first, but wore thin as the script became more disjointed. The idea was to bring a painting and several photographs to theatrical



Michael Huebner

life. Intended as a metaphor for the War on Terrorism and a humanitarian statement, this elaborate work stretched the imagination in too many directions. Put simply, it needed pruning.

► Anne LeBaron is a talented composer whose work spans jazz and folk idioms. The most engaging work on her set was "Sauger," which presented recorded vacuum cleaner sounds while trombonist Jay Evans played and hummed into his instrument in a humorous dialogue with the machines.

► At the Mason Music Oasis on Friday, the wind ensemble Celebration Winds got the festival off to a bold and majestic start during the Ecumenical Service of Thanksgiving.

► On Sunday at the same venue, the Evergreen Consort dressed in period costume to play music from the Renaissance and Baroque eras. The ensemble consists of harpsichord and five recorders ranging from soprano to bass and includes modern folk and popular music in its repertoire. Hearing this delightful ensemble was a rare treat for Birmingham, which is sorely lagging in the early music department.

Competition winners

A total of \$12,000 in prize money was given out last weekend at the 25th annual Opera Birmingham Vocal Competition. Soprano Leah Hunt of Lincoln, Ga., won the first prize of \$5,000, double the amount from last year. Hunt topped 61 other contestants with arias from Handel's "Alcina" and Bernstein's "Candide." Tenor Ernesto Rodriguez of New Orleans came in second with arias from Giordano's "Andrea Chenier" and Puccini's "Tosca." Five other finalists split \$4,000 in prize money. Each prize was underwritten by individuals or couples.

Judges were veteran Opera Birmingham conductor Mark Graf, Nashville Opera's artistic director John Hoomes and executive director Carol Penterman. Laurie Middaugh and Dale Reynolds accompanied on piano.

New this year was the Audience Award, given at the black-tie finals event attended by about 150 at Vestavia Country Club on Sunday. "The audience

gets to vote on their favorite, so they were kind of like the fourth judge," said Opera Birmingham General Director John Jones. "It was a concert setting, where each of the final seven contestants sang two arias."

Rodriguez took that award as well, winning a total of \$3,000 for his two prizes. Preliminaries were held at Trinity Methodist Church on Friday and Saturday.

The competition regularly attracts singers from the east and west coasts as well as places like Texas, Florida and Tennessee. "They were not only competing for money but were auditioning for Nashville and Birmingham at the same time," Jones said.

Summer Sounds

Now that music al fresco has become a way of life, it's time to gather up the folding chairs and blankets and head to Caldwell Park. The Alabama Symphony's second annual "Sounds of Summer" starts tonight on a patriotic theme. Local singer Kristi Tingle Higginbotham will join the ASO and a chorus assembled by Mark Ridings.

If you're an armed forces vet, you're invited to wear your uniform or uniform hat and get in free. You'll also be urged to stand and be recognized while each branch is honored with the playing of their anthems.

The proceedings get under way at 7 p.m. with a color guard presentation. You can also sign a banner that will be sent to troops overseas. The music starts at 8 p.m., and includes music by George M. Cohan, Richard Rodgers, John Williams, Morton Gould and Irving Berlin. A laser light show will cap off the proceedings.

Tickets are \$12, \$5 for children under 12. Seating is on the lawn. Barbecue and drinks can be purchased at the park and picnic baskets pre-ordered from The Veranda. Call 251-7727 for more info.