

Monday, April 14th, 2008...4:31 pm

Review: guitar in an expanded sound world



There's nothing much modern about the interior of St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster, but guitarist, composer and experimental musician (and Millersville University Professor) Rusty Banks filled the interior with the newest of new music Sunday afternoon in a program of mostly 21st century works.

The first two works on the program were for solo guitar: Banks's *Jim Walter No. 5* and Dorothy Hindman's *Needlepoint*. *Jim Walter No. 5* was named for a mine in Alabama where two methane explosions killed 13 workers on Sept. 23, 2001, including a childhood friend of Banks' father. The work, commissioned by another guitarist, started out as a post-Sept. 11 meditation on the terrorist attacks and the resulting flood of "faux patriotism," but became a lament for these lives lost while the world was looking elsewhere. Repeated notes and repeated two-note sequences gradually change a bucolic mood into tension, and a fugal section changes that mood into fear and terror. The piece ends on a series of dissonant chords. In *Needlepoint*, which Hindman

composed while her mother was battling cancer, two antithetical themes — one calm, one spiky, with lots of guitar-slapping and other effects — are pitted against each other, with the latter seeming to "infect" the former with increasing dissonance. The piece ends on one subdued chord.

Mirrors, Stones and Cotton was a more light-hearted affair. Written by Charles Norman Mason for guitar and electronics and premiered by Banks in 1996, the piece brings together guitar and percussive, sometime oddball, electronics into a surprisingly seamless web. Banks refers to the "almost game-like challenges" of the piece in his notes, and the music conveyed some of the bouncy pep of the arcade or Gameboy.

A basically contemplative piece for guitar, boom boxes and Japanese temple bell, *Hydrology* has its groovy, funky sections but fits well in the resonant acoustic of a church sanctuary. It's played in four continuous sections. "Meniscus" opens the piece with the ringing sound of the temple bell, its resonances crescendoing and changing into electronic sounds, followed by ethereal choir-like phrases. The three boom boxes, positioned around the audience, increase the "surround-sound" feeling of total immersion in a new sonic space. The guitar doesn't enter until the second section, "Riffle," a headlong, rushing fugue-like passage anchored by a strong bass line. "Pool" plunges the listener back into the sound world of the temple bell, with Banks putting down the guitar to play the bell, which rests open-side up on a stand, with a brush-like device, sometimes striking it with the handle, sometimes brushing the exterior, sometimes stirring the brush around the interior as if it were a pot. The fourth section, "Zug Bug," puts all the elements — guitar, bell, electronics — back together in a lively and rhythmic mix, ending with the fading chime of the bell.

The concert ended with "Observation, Memory, Process," a work for guitar and electronics, with video by [Scott Conard](#), taken at [Chickies Rock Park](#). Flowing music accompanied flowing images on two screens (often split into four or six). A shot of a Stonehenge-like elevated loading platform for trains opened and closed the piece. A long-held shot of reflections on rippling water started to look like a pattern of sound waves; the camera sometimes panned up wildly into tree branches, other times held a steady image of a small waterfall, or followed a pair of legs walking up stone stairs.

It was great to have a second chance to hear some of these works. Many thanks to the [Millersville University Music Department](#) and the St. Cecilia Concert Series!

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Pianist Hiu-Wah Au, a professor at Elizabethtown College, will perform at 7:30 tonight in Zug Recital Hall. Cost is free. She will perform Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D Minor, Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 3 in A Minor and Beethoven's Piano Sonata in G Major.

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The photographs on this page were taken on the grounds of St. James Episcopal Church. Hey, it's spring.