

MUSIC REVIEW

Refitting the Classical Experience for a New Century



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Paul Haas conducted the Knights chamber orchestra during "Rewind" at the Orensanz Center for the Arts on Thursday night.

By BERNARD HOLLAND

A lowered stage, and live pieces mixed with computerized ones.

Classical music concerts try to function as living art while operating under rules at least 150 years old. The "Rewind" concert at the Orensanz Center for the Arts on Thursday night offered suggestions for breaking such bad habits. Paul Haas thought up this event and conducted the chamber orchestra he calls the Knights. The aim, evidently, was to cheer up chronic concertgoers and catch the eyes and ears of novitiates as well.

Tradition puts musicians on an elevated stage and the audience in front of it and below it. Listeners are usually in the dark (though in my Vienna days house lights went up when the music began). In his 1960 book, "Crowds and Power," Elias Canetti likened the symphony concert to a Roman Catholic Mass. Just as a congregation acts when and how those

presiding tell it to, audiences clap at prescribed moments, leave their seats midway to talk nonsense to one another during 20-minute intermissions and otherwise keep quiet.

"Rewind" placed its players on the floor and in the center of this shabby-chic former synagogue on the Lower East Side. You had the feeling of being with musicians, not just observing them. Physically centering the group sent sound up to high ceilings and distributed it equally. Acoustics were vivid and undistorted.

There were 11 separate pieces, but the music never stopped, interstices being filled with computer-generated

inventions and live-instrument transitions that led from one item to the next. If anything, it kept people from clapping. Traditional audiences demand to have their say, but here all stilted, ritual interruptions were squelched.

The program was heavy with composers who traffic in juxtapositions of old and new: pieces by Schnittke, Stravinsky, Villa-Lobos, James MacMillan, in which Renaissance polyphony, honky-tonk and the tango regularly bump into one another. The come-on to newcomers was clear: "Look, we can be hip too." Yet the center of the evening was the supercharged Romanticism of Schoenberg's "Verklärte Nacht," performed with passion and beauty by Mr. Haas and his young players.

With music played as convincingly as this, "Rewind" did not have to work so hard at glamour, glitter and gee-whiz theatricality.

Rewind

Orensanz Center for the Arts

I suspect that "Rewind" seemed to involve its young and substantial audience so acutely because the music and the musicians were very good, not because of the peripheral bells and whistles. It also worked because the physical format made sure that classical music's bad habits didn't have a chance.

Anne Akiko Meyers and Colin Jacobsen were the solo violinists. The musical continuity was devised by Judd Greenstein, Joel Morales and Joshua Penman. Mozart, Corelli, Purcell, Biagio Marini and Alexander Raskatov were the other composers.