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A RIVETING NEW CONCERT FORMAT

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Despite some definite growing pains, a dazzling new concert format has been launched, moving us into the future by a century or two. Or maybe a millennium or two.

This was a true ear-opener---and eye-opener too. Elements of spatial music, mobile sculpture, selective amplification and elaborate (uncredited) lighting design came into play. But the boldest move of all was stringing together some 10 works for the ensemble performing nonstop, neatly linked by electronic bridging snippets created by local composers.

The high production costs might well have doubled those of a conventional concert by the New Century Chamber Orchestra. But it got a sell-out audience at the Yerba Buena Gardens Forum to turn out for a 20th-century slate of works, teeming with Schnittke, Stravinsky and Schoenberg---hardly the Schubert-Schumann-Saint-Saens type program typical for this size crowd.

Credit the fast-rising guest conductor Paul Haas from New York---a real find!---not only for bringing off the modern program, but also for extraordinary eloquence in leading these locals and making them sound like a million-dollar ensemble. His reading of Schoenberg's mystical "Transfigured Night" was to die for, as dramatic and sensitive as any you have ever heard.

Haas calls his format REWIND, already explored in New York, and now making waves around the country. Innovation is clearly his philosophy, attempting to revise the tired concert format with new ideas and new works. And when violin star Anne Akiko Meyers wasn't playing in the upper reaches of the Forum at the Jan. 19 concert, a musician walked behind the patrons gently massaging sounds out of hand chimes, all in embracing every one with spatial music.

The Stravinsky "Pulcinella" and Suite No. 2 ranked among the most familiar selections. But there was also Villa-Lobos, via Bachianas Brasileiras No. 4 for strings, the Scot James MacMillan's "As Others See Us," a jazzy work with winds, and

Alexander Raskatov's "Five Minutes from the Life of WAM" (presumably Mozart), with Meyers intoning a stylish solo.

Effective bridge pieces were provided by Joshua Penman, Mason Bates and Judd Greenstein.

The shifting red and green lighting contributed to the immersion experience, heightened by the slow undulations of a suspended Buckyball lattice sculpture created by Reuben Margolin. Its shape suggested a tortoise shell, or giant spider.

The hall was set up as if for a prize-fight, with an elevated square platform at the center for most of the musicians, and the audience all around. While interesting on paper, this in-the-round design flopped, with three-quarters of the audience gazing at the rear ends of the musicians, unable to see more than the outer ranks. Also this listener was frustrated at the inability to identify any of the music, without so much as a penlight, or intermission breaks, to read the less-than-user-friendly program.

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