

Newsday

NEW YORK, NY
NOVEMBER 17, 2004

MUSIC REVIEW

Rhythmic explosion glitters and compels

PAUL DRESHER ENSEMBLE. Music by Paul Dresher. Paul Dresher, electric guitar, quadrachord. David Abel, violin. Julie Steinberg, piano. Joel Davel, electronic percussion. Attended Friday night. Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall.

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON
STAFF WRITER

In the year since it opened, Zankel Hall, the golden lair beneath Carnegie Hall, has established itself as a den of eclecticism. Down there, as in many people's ears and car stereos, music does not have a mainstream. Rather, it is a delta of traditions, with rivulets that merge and diverge.

You couldn't ask for a clearer mission statement than the two-week extravaganza that opened the hall in the fall of 2003 or last weekend's compressed sequel, both organized around the catholic tastes of Carnegie's resident composer, John Adams. This year's mini-festival opened with the young Algerian singer and guitarist Souad Massi, passed through the jazz saxophonist Joshua Redman and concluded with the Iranian kamanche player Kayhan Kalhor. Adams may write for opera houses and symphony halls, but the music he listens to belongs in cozier rooms in which, ideally, drinks would be served.

Friday's slot went to Paul Dresher, an inventive but disciplined Los Angeles composer and electric guitarist whose music draws on deceptively disparate currents: rock, minimalism, ragas and gamelan. All of them share a sound palette dominated by plucking and percussion and a cyclical structure based on repeating riffs.

Born in 1951, Dresher was a teenager in Los Angeles when George Harrison sat at the feet of Ravi Shankar, when Steve Reich returned to New York after studying drumming in Ghana and when Lou Harrison was proselytizing for the Indonesian percussion orchestra called gamelan. For a musician with open ears,

mid-century America was an exhilarating incubator of impurity.

A generation later, this assortment of sounds has coalesced into a personality, and a compelling one. Most of Dresher's music is written for the Paul Dresher Ensemble, an electro-acoustic band that marries ancient instruments with freshly invented ones in a steely, brightly hued jangle. Playing with a sharp, rhythmic snap, Paul Hanson made the bassoon sound like a natural member of a rock group. Percussionist Joel Davel spent much of the evening at the marimba lumina, an electronic touchpad played with mallets. And Dresher doubled on quadrachord, an electrified set of 12-foot strings stretched over a steel frame and played with a bow, with mallets, a plectrum and a rolling metal ball.

Dresher marshals all this amplified potency into music of cool intensity. His Violin Concerto opens with dissonant, explosive piano chords like a choir of dented bells. The violinist, David Abel, plucks his way across a sparkling landscape — a quiet ribbiting motive in the bassoon, an eerie slide down the strings of the electric guitar — until he takes up the bow and plunges into an underbrush of dense and dogged patterns. The music rarely sits on a texture long enough to bore, and at his best, as in "Double Ikat" for the tamer group of violin, piano and electronic percussion — Dresher pulls long threads of glittering melody out of the polychrome weave of sounds.

The electro-acoustic band has become a semi-standard formation, and Dresher leads a good one. The players behaved like well-calibrated gears, slipping neatly into complex, interlocking rhythms. But whether because of acoustics, jet lag or the natural hazards of the performing life, Friday's concert lacked the muscular, close-up forcefulness of Dresher's new CD, "Cage Machine."

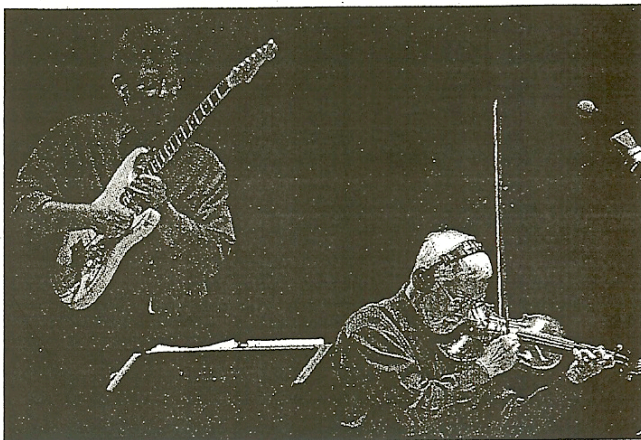


PHOTO BY PETE CHEE

Composer-guitarist Paul Dresher and violinist David Abel at Zankel Hall

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