

**Paul Dresher's Electro-Acoustic Band**, from left: Marja Mutru, keyboards; Peter Josheff, bass clarinet; Dresher; Karen Bentley-Pollick, violin; Joel Davel, MIDI mallet percussion; and Gene Reffkin, electronic drums.



Encore Communications

## Dresher thriving on tension

By Joshua Kosman  
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

For two decades and more, Bay Area composer Paul Dresher has been turning the business of eclecticism on its head by writing music that keeps listeners guessing about what is coming down the pike next.

In his theater and dance pieces, concertos and chamber music, he revels in **REVIEW** an omnivorous sensibility that combines rock 'n' roll, minimalism, Indian music and ambient sounds into a pungent and wonderfully elusive hybrid.

On Wednesday night, in the first of two concerts at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, the Paul Dresher Ensemble inaugurated its 20th season with a program that featured representative samples of Dresher's music as well as three world premieres.

The new pieces had their moments, especially in the opportunity they offered to enjoy the virtuosity of the Electro-Acoustic Band, an ensemble that combines such high-tech gadgets as a virtual marimba with instrumental dinosaurs like violin and bassoon.

But it was the second half, featuring three of Dresher's works (all available on a recent New Albion CD, "Cage Ma-

chine"), that provided the most consistent rewards.

All boasted Dresher's most striking stylistic thumbprint, a sort of hesitant negotiation between sweet-toned, swirling lyricism and the impatient impulse to rock.

Throughout his music, you can hear these sides of Dresher's artistic personality tugging away at one another, and it's that tension that gives his music its charge.

This was most evident in the oldest piece on the program, the vibrant "Din of Iniquity" from 1994.

It's cast in three connected sections running fast-slow-fast, and the fluency with which it moves from soft-toned grace to the angular, beat-driven finale is remarkable.

"Chorale Times Two," the second movement of Dresher's 1996-97 violin concerto, pitted a rhapsodic violin soliloquy, superbly played by Karen Bentley-Pollick, against Dresher's more piercing electric guitar riffs. Again, the music depended on the contrasts — in both time and texture — between these two veins.

For "In the Name(less)," Dresher brought out two invented instruments for an amiable if somewhat long-winded exploration of the sounds they can produce.

The Qadrachord is a hori-

zontal instrument about 15 feet long, whose four amplified strings can be bowed, plucked, rubbed or beaten with sticks to yield a welter of twangy or sustained sonorities; the Marimba Lumina, a circuit-diagram version of the marimba played with actual sticks, does who-knows-what. The music itself proved more speculative than concise.

The new works of the first half included "In Deserto — Black Rock," a set of four beautiful and all-too-short nature pictures by Ingram Marshall, and James Mobberley's witty, vivacious "Fusebox," in which a regular rhythmic groove keeps starting and stopping amid showers of musical sparks.

Leading off was Neil B. Rolnick's "Plays Well With Others," a puerile whine of protest cast in schoolyard taunts aimed at the Republican malefactors referred to here as Georgie and Dickie.

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