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A zesty sample of new music from a bass clarinet

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The bass clarinet is a strange beast. It resembles a chrome-plated gardening tool but is capable of an array of sounds from floor-shaking bass to ethereal, high phrases.

The 2009 New Music Miami ISCM Festival Series opened Saturday night with Evan Ziporyn, a leading bass-clarinet advocate who offered a deftly varied concert of four works.

Director Orlando Jacinto Garcia has wisely chosen to spread out the events of Florida International University's festival rather than jam them into the single week of past years. Five more events are scheduled through May 3.

Ziporyn is a genial artist, and a brief discussion of the selections with Garcia made an apt prelude for the performances at FIU's Frost Museum of Art. David Lang's *Press Release* proved a lively opener.

Lang has morphed from his antic pop beginnings as a cofounder of the Bang on a Can All-Stars to a respected composer who won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in music. He wrote *Press Release* for Ziporyn in 1991 and describes it as a collision of "Johann Sebastian Bach and James Brown."

I heard more Brown than Bach in Lang's rock-funk style, with emphatic bass lines contrasted against long-limbed melodies on top. The lines grow increasingly elaborate and complex, mixing and separating. Like many Lang works, this one is a bit repetitive and goes on too long, but Ziporyn gave the music vital and energetic advocacy.

Garcia's *Sombras Sobre Parque Central* (Shadows over Central Park), written in Caracas in 2003 at a time of much political strife, expresses the composer's longing for peace. It's characteristic of Garcia's music, with a meditative, concentrated expression, though the composer's pointillist style of acutely colored hues and precise balances are a bit diluted when scored for a single instrument. Still, it's a compelling, atmospheric work with haunting wind noise and slowly mutating fragments. Ziporyn made a worthy case for it, handling its multiphonics and other challenges with skill and facility.

Ziporyn showed he's no slouch on the traditional clarinet with a combustible rendition of Steve Reich's *New York Counterpoint*. The only repertory item heard Saturday, Reich's work places the soloist's real-time single line against prerecorded tape of his playing of 10 different clarinet lines (including two bass clarinets). The piece reflects Reich's Minimalist style at its most bracing and communicative, and Ziporyn brought off the pulsing, shifting syncopations with immense verve and panache.

Ziporyn saved the best for last with his composition *Walk the Dog*. Despite its offhand title, the work is a substantial 25-minute concerto for bass clarinet. Like the Reich piece, it juxtaposes live solo playing against

a prerecording, in this case an offbeat, world-music electronic melange of Gambian harps, Balinese frogs and, at one point, what sounded like thundering elephants.

Yet *Walk the Dog* is not gimmicky, and the ever-churning electronic backdrop is a worthy canvas for Ziporyn's high-stepping jazz solos and array of agile multiple voicings and highly contrasted colors. If the concerto is closer to jazz than to the Western classical tradition, it suits Ziporyn's populist style as an original, well crafted and enjoyable work.

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