

November 19, 2004

MUSIC REVIEW | 'IN YOUR EAR'

Weaving Western Instruments and Asian Hammers Together

By ANNE MIDGETTE

Music institutions in New York tend to present one kind of music. But the goal of Zankel Hall is to undercut the dominance of 19th-century Western art music at Carnegie Hall - undercut literally because it is in Carnegie's basement and figuratively by bringing in world music, jazz and other kinds of performance.

For the hall's opening last year, Carnegie invited the composer John Adams to curate a two-week festival demonstrating its artistic range; they liked the result so much that they had him come back to reprise it over three days last weekend, an event titled "In Your Ear," offering everything from the Paul Dresher Ensemble to the Iranian kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor.

On Saturday afternoon the featured artists were Evan Ziporyn, a composer and clarinetist, and the gamelan orchestra Galak Tika, which Mr. Ziporyn founded at M.I.T. in 1993.

Gamelan means "to hammer," and the orchestra is composed of xylophonelike instruments whose hard metallic rhythms evoke, to Western ears, the timbre of Wagner's Niebelungs at their anvils, ameliorated by a few softer mallets and a set of dark metal gongs. One player keeps the beat on a simple percussion instrument, while the effective bandleader is one of two drummers, playing a two-headed instrument, at centerstage. The complex music is not notated, which gives it a sense of spontaneity as well as inevitability, like the pattern of tree branches against the sky. On Saturday, Galak Tika opened with a popular piece written by a Balinese master in the early 1960's, showing the gamelan as it would like to be seen.

But one point of the exercise was that Mr. Ziporyn had taken the tradition and run with it, so most of the program was devoted to two pieces in which he added Western instruments to the gamelan tapestry. "Amok!" from 1997, mingled cello with keyboard and percussion samples, refracting even the cello's tone into an unusual wailing quaver. The piece played with the delicate balance of interaction between the gamelan orchestra's musicians, thrusting other sounds into the music's spokes and exploring the new lopsided patterns that emerged. It was, however, a lengthy excursion.

Tighter and more obviously appealing was "Tire Fire" (1994), for gamelan, keyboard and three electric guitars. Toward the end of the piece, the gamelan players paused to listen to the guitars, then picked up on what they were doing in their own language, creating an exuberant blast of metal fireworks.