

REVIEW

Minimalism powerful in Wellspring, Opus 21 collaborative concert

By Matthew Steel

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Kalamazoo has a strong tradition of chamber music and dance, but the expectations of local audiences are based largely on a classical repertoire. This is likely why Thursday nights “Spring Concert of Music and Dance” at Wellspring Theater, a collaboration between Opus 21 and Wellspring/Cori Terry and Dancers, began with a video.

It featured Richard Adams, the founder and artistic director of the award-winning new music ensemble Opus 21, in a joint interview with Wellspring director Cori Terry. They remarked on the novel style of the concert’s music and how it came to be realized in dance.

All of the works on the program can be labeled minimalist or post-minimalist. Minimalism—music reduced to a few basic elements—came into prominence in the 1960s. Its style includes tonal harmonies, regularly pulsed rhythms and short repeated patterns that vary slowly by small increments. Post-minimalism, currently the cutting edge of music composition, is derived from minimalist principles but treats the music in a less formal manner. Both styles often make use of amplification, extended instrumental techniques and prerecorded sounds.

Five of the musical works on Thursday’s program were premieres, commissioned by and written for Opus 21. Two of the premieres, Mark Dancigers’ “Thaw” and Richard Adams’ “Free Fall,” were perhaps the most immediately accessible works on the program. They gradually evolved into almost conventional textures of lyrical melody over supporting harmonies.

Adams’ work was set to dance by Terry, a work she titled “Sense of Self.” The choreography featured Terry alone, and she was joined near the end by the rest of the troupe: Alexis Harris, Jennifer Hudson, Michael Miller, Rachel Miller, Francesca Pileci-Bates and Paula Rinaldo.

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Wellspring/Opus 21 collaborative concert, cont.

The work that elicited the most audience response was Bill Ryan's "Rapid Assembly" with choreography of the same name by Michael Miller, Wellspring's artistic associate. The composer, who was present for this premiere, explained that the piece had no story to it, but merely represented a compositional process. The opening motif grew and slowly took on a jazzy character. The dance mimicked the concept of the music by going through patterns and creating permutations of those patterns.

"Places," choreographed by Rachel Miller, upstaged the music in Dennis DeSantis' premiere work "One Trick Pony," since it began well before the first note was played. DeSantis, who earned his undergraduate music degree from Western Michigan University, created a seven-and-a-half minute work based largely on a single rhythmic pattern laid down at the opening by pianist Yu-Lien The.

Ann Clyne's premiere work "Next Stop" featured the pre-recorded sounds of a New York subway station. In the middle of the piece, percussionist Judy Moonert was called upon to use two bows at once to bow on keys of the vibraphone.

Steve Reich's 1985 classic minimalist work "New York Counterpoint" was deftly executed by clarinetist Bradley Wong. His part was a counterpoint to prerecorded and processed woodwind sounds. The undulating music accompanied Terry's new choreography titled "Rippled Effect."

The most challenging work for the audience to appreciate was David Lang's "Stick Figure" (2001), which aimed for the utmost simplicity as in a child's stick-figure drawing.

All of the choreography was very creative and executed with precision. The music was well-crafted and played with great passion and conviction. And at the end there was enthusiastic applause (no pro forma standing ovation) from an audience that recognized the artistry, although they may not have fully come to terms with the minimalist aesthetics.