

Concert review: Back Cove festival highlights what's in vogue

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Lifestyle

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And, with a program that puts the spotlight on composers and blended music and poetry, that's a good thing.



The three-day [Back Cove Contemporary Music Festival](#) came to an end Sunday afternoon with a concert at [SPACE Gallery](#) that explored some of the hybrid new-music forms that are currently in vogue.

Actually, "in vogue" has almost sinister connotations in classical music circles, where trendiness is supposedly an unworthy consideration in a world that regards itself as serious and sober. But that's nonsense. Classical music is as susceptible to fashion as anything else. If you don't believe that, listen to recordings of a single work, made at 10-year intervals, starting in 1950. What you will hear is the march of changing interpretive fashion, with hallmarks identifiable by the decade each recording was made.

One trend the concert celebrated was the re-emergence of the composer-performer; all these works were presided over by their composers and their ensembles. Another was composers' fascination with mixing techniques from different artistic realms. The works presented shared two elements – classical structure of some sort, and poetry, recited rather than sung. Several of the poets were on hand to read their works as part of the performance, which besides being part of the festival, celebrated National Poetry Month.

Most pieces had a third element, too. In the case of [Mark Tipton's](#) "After You'd Gone: Four Alan Brooks Poems," and The Jazz/Poetry Project's "Out of Nowhere," that element was jazz. Tipton, a trumpeter, led his ensemble, Les Sorciers Perdus, in varied accompaniments to Brooks' readings, which had a rhythmic quality that placed the lines of text snugly into the musical texture. The most striking of the four movements, "Aurora," had trumpet and percussion moves that called to mind Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du Soldat."

In "Out of Nowhere," by The Jazz/Poetry Project – poet Betsy Scholl, accompanied by an electric guitar and saxophone duo – the music and text were tightly interwoven, largely because Scholl's richly descriptive poems either referred directly to classic jazz pieces, such as Thelonious Monk's "Misterioso," or provided clues about the kind of music that was required ("U.S. Clamps Down on Pianos to Cuba," which was read to the rhythms of a light Afro-Cuban score).

Humor was an element in [Beth Wiemann's](#) "Jet-Pack for One," a colorful, virtuosic bass clarinet solo, played by Wiemann with an electronic track that included voices, processed to sound like cartoon space aliens, reading a poem by Miriam Gamble. Josh Newton's "Commedia" had an amusing text by Nicole J. Rawding, which Newton read, but the work's real charm was in the vivid interaction of its flute, violin and French horn lines.

[Philip Carlsen](#), the cellist and composer who directs the festival, contributed "[All the Desanctified Places](#)," a 20-

minute setting of Robert Bringhurst's extraordinary poem of the same name. Written in three contrapuntal voices, the poem is an angry look at mankind's destruction of the world, and Carlsen responded with a driven, changeable score – one moment it scampers, brashly, the next it is sweetly hymn-like – for string trio. Bringhurst was on hand for the performance but did not read. Instead, the three players recited the poem while playing – one of the piece's most striking touches.

Carlsen's work was one of several in which politics was a crucial element.

Tug Collective – cultural anthropologist Gaelyn Aguilar and percussionist-composer Gustavo Aguilar – presented “No20Wo,” part of the work they composed while following the Lewis and Clark Trail, collecting information about racism, colonialism and other historical ills, and asking the question, “What will it take for us to learn to live together?” Their work explored that theme, with Gaelyn reciting from memory, accompanied by Gustavo's bells and electronic sounds.

Bill Matthews' “Many Drops” used video imagery of water – the play of waves over sand and rocks, principally – matched to an appealing, tactile electronic score, as the backdrop for a slowly unfolding quotation from Robert F. Kennedy about finding hope by resisting oppression. The statement was first broken into individual words, projected on the screen and read aloud by the audience. At the end of the piece, the statement was shown in full, with its attribution.

Would anyone have thought, when Kennedy said this, that one day it would be presented, and understood by a concert audience, as a reference to this country's sitting president?

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