

## MUSIC REVIEW: NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE

## Ensemble offers audience remembrance, premieres

By Peter Jacobi

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An IU focus marked Thursday evening's concert by the New Music Ensemble in Auer Hall.

The event was dedicated to K. Robert Schwartz, an alumnus in musicology who as critic, writer and teacher sought to promote understanding of contemporary music and who died from complications of AIDS 10 years ago Sunday at age 42. The works performed were those of another Jacobs School alum and two members of its composition faculty. In total, they gave the audience a heady assortment of material to listen to.

Joseph Klein, now professor of music at the University of North Texas, earned his doctorate here. He was back as guest to hear a configuration of 10 musicians from the New Music Ensemble play his 1999 "Occam's Razor," a collection of seven studies, some brief, others not quite so. Then, as premieres, the ensemble attended to selections from P.Q. Phan's "Songs of Solitude" and the whole of Don Freund's "Test of Time."

A single hearing of Klein's complex set of pieces was insufficient to determine whether the music has a distinguishing voice, an individuality that would earn it repeat attention. But there could be no doubt the level of craft in its makeup is high. The program notes indicate that literary and other artistic connections inspired the music: Wallace Stevens, Rene Magritte, Milas Kundera, Alice Fulton and John Ashbery are among those mentioned, along with the 14th century English philosopher William of Occam, for whom the work was named. The abstract nature of the music made the allusions difficult to grasp.

The composer speaks of micro-level rhythmic and pitch cells and octatonic collections, of fractal geometry and octave displacements, of genetic cross-

over and kinetic intensification in explanation of what he conceived. What one heard were seven expositions, intriguingly scored for one percussion, two brass, three woodwinds, and four strings (including harp and harpsichord), and used in combinations ranging from solo to 10.

Phan's songs address solitude, as both loneliness and celebration of self, as negative and the positive, as sad and joyful. He has set them to the exuberant poetry of Walt Whitman (from "Song of Myself"), Emily Dickinson ("When Night Is Almost Done"), and Theodore Roethke ("The Waking"); to the mystic "Tonight I've Watched" of Sappho; to the sadness in Arthur Symons' "Isolation" and W.S. Merwin's "The Lantern," and to the puzzling in Samuel Beckett's "My Way."

Instrumentally, Phan's score is an array of surprises and delights; his use of 14 instruments is highly expressive and imaginative. The vocal element often matches the orchestral but tends at times to meander, at those points adding little to the poetry, even getting in the way, what with imbalances that drown the words and make them indistinct, despite the efforts of mezzo-soprano Mary Ann Hart, whose enunciation usually is crystal clear.

The composition was written for her, and her projected aura of conviction honored it.

Freund's "Text of Time" is a playful exercise of contrasting lines and syncopations, of themes introduced and interrupted, developed and piled on top of one another. Its 17 musicians had to pay close attention, not to miss cues. Freund, doubling as conductor, made sure they didn't. He had them hop, skip, and jump through this inviting music with admirable dexterity. One longs to hear it again to catch the nuances therein.

The New Music Ensemble's own David Dzubay skillfully conducted the earlier works.