

April 7, 2010

MUSIC REVIEW

## Music Surely Soothes; Can It Also Heal?

By STEVE SMITH

When presenting concerts devoted to contemporary music in a variety of styles, an overarching theme can provide context. You regularly encounter programs bundled according to historical period, ties to other art forms or more fanciful notions. For this year's Cutting Edge Concerts New Music Festival, an annual series presented by the composer and conductor Victoria Bond, "Music & Health: Can Music Heal?" is the banner notion.

But during the first concert in the series, on Monday night in the [Leonard Nimoy](#) Thalia at [Symphony Space](#), that theme seemed less concerned with the pieces performed than with a mission involving music in general. Each event in the four-concert series is linked to a medical organization that is to receive 50 percent of the evening's ticket proceeds. Miles of Hope Breast Cancer Foundation was Monday's beneficiary; CancerCare, the Integrative Medicine Services at Sloan-Kettering Memorial Cancer Center and Young Survival Coalition will follow.

Ms. Bond laid the groundwork for the festival in a series of monthly newsletters now on her Web site ([welltonenewmusic.org](http://welltonenewmusic.org)), which included interviews with the composers involved — some on health-related issues, some not — and with doctors, music therapists and cancer survivors.

But if you missed those newsletters or Monday's preconcert discussion, which included representatives from Miles of Hope, you might have failed to notice the theme entirely. None of the pieces performed by the Cygnus Ensemble — an excellent sextet featuring flute, oboe, violin, cello and two guitars (one player doubling on mandolin, banjo and theorbo) — was explicitly concerned with health or medicine.

Instead, Akemi Naito's "Mindscape" was motivated by the notion of ruin, the passage of time and a shooting star, rendered with impressionistic textures, bucolic melodies and squealing split tones on oboe. Laura Schwendinger's "Garden of Earthly Delights," inspired by the famous Bosch triptych of that name, was a suspenseful tangle of bristling lines and eerie dissonances with passages of melancholy respite.

Martin Rokeach's "Overdrive," true to its title, was propelled by near-perpetual-motion rhythms from the two guitarists, across which winds and strings drifted like clouds. Ms. Bond's quirky "Peculiar Plants," originally for solo harpsichord, was effectively rearranged for the ensemble by the guitarist and Cygnus leader William Anderson. Bright consonances and buoyant grooves in David Claman's "Like This," for violin and cello, suggested half of the Kronos Quartet in action.

The last work on the program was also the most substantial: Harold Meltzer's three-movement "Brion," a finalist for the [Pulitzer Prize](#) last year, evoked an Italian cemetery with a strong, memorable opening theme and deft allusions to shimmering pools and shifting light.

One more piece not listed in the program deserves mention: Neil Rolnick's brief, witty "Phones Off" preceded the concert with a babble of cellphone tones, intended to prevent the same from happening during the performance. It worked.

*The Cutting Edge Concerts series continues on Monday at the Leonard Nimoy Thalia, Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway, at 95th Street, (212) 864-5400, [symphonyspace.org](http://symphonyspace.org)*

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