

CUBE ensemble closes an eclectic era with artistic gusto

By Michael Cameron | SPECIAL TO THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE
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For 20 years CUBE Contemporary Chamber Ensemble has treated Chicago's new music enthusiasts to diffuse, eclectic menus, promoting fare untethered to stylistic ghettos. Now amid that artistic agenda comes internal change, oboist Patricia Morehead presented her final program as group's chief programmer, Friday at the Merit School of Music's Gottlieb Hall, before new artistic director Christie Miller takes the helm.

Far-flung as ever, the offerings included nine works of varying instrumentation and construction, four of them world premieres. The intermittent high points and sense of occasion made the evening a treat for CUBE fans.

The viola grabbed the spotlight in many of the works, the instrument's earthy tone coaxing an elegiac air from some of the contributors. William Ferris' "Lux Aeterna" paired viola with flute, the two voices ruminating attractively in their lower registers. Frank Babbitt and flutist Claudia Cryer gave an affecting, mellow-toned performance.

Babbitt was equally persuasive in Patricia Morehead's "Elegy," spinning a dark, brooding portrait of the composer's ailing relative. Patricia's husband, Philip Morehead, was the keenly sensitive pianist.

This autumnal sentiment was mined once more in the lyrical third movement of Gyula Fekete's "Divertimento Celebration C-U-B-E." Otherwise the piece marked a skillful synthesis of neo-classic Stravinsky and Milhaud. Lawrence Axelrod took to the keyboard in his own "Duo Concertante," with violist Claudia Lasareff-Mironoff in a role that promoted a more comprehensive showcase for her instrument. Fleet-footed and skittish one moment and lyrical the next, the duo found common ground between two disparate instruments. Kurt Coble's "Moth's Wing" was a deft miniature for speaking violist.

Eleanor Cory's "Mood Swing" unfolded in a language both atonal and accessibly dramatic. Two young composers were represented by works that show a rough measure of promise. Ben Babbitt's "Frankincense Immediate" married traditional viola sound with granular electronic mumbling, and Sam Cole's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Composer" untied a grab bag of sonic paraphernalia.

The high point of the concert was a solo piano work, "Tropes IV," by Jorge Liderman. The player piano concoctions of Conlon Nancarrow came to mind, as did the mystical preludes of Russian composer Alexander Scriabin. The five movements emerged from overlays of polytonal textures and ostinatos. Philip Morehead was the fine pianist. The other ensemble players included violinist Chuck Bontrager; cellist Mira Luxion; trombonist Chelsea French; trumpet player Travis Heath; and Tina Laughlin on percussion.

The news of Liderman's death in February from an apparent suicide gave the evening still another bittersweet note of valediction. Fortunately for CUBE and its loyal fan base, their mission will continue into a third decade.

CUBE Contemporary Chamber Ensemble's "Viola Fantasy" at Gottlieb Hall

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Recommend (3)

By Andrew Patner

For 20 years now, CUBE Contemporary Chamber Ensemble has served a number of essential roles in Chicago's musical life.

It has been the most dependable presenter of contemporary music here for that period. As Gyula Fekete, a Roosevelt and Northwestern University alum -- and now one of Hungary's leading younger composers and pedagogues -- put it in a program note for Friday night's CUBE performance, Chicago composition students in the 1990s "followed each CUBE season with great enthusiasm."

CUBE has been a rare outlet, too, for the work of women composers and, with artistic directors of very different backgrounds and aims in Patricia Morehead and Janice Misurell-Mitchell, it has presented the greatest variety of styles and methods from women artists and their male counterparts as well.

And the group has been an incubator for the most neglected members of the chamber music scene: wind players and their instruments. Morehead, an oboist and composer, and Misurell-Mitchell, a flutist and performance artist, have single- (or should that in their case be

double-?) handedly seen to it that new works were written for winds and that wind players were invited to play them.

Morehead and Misurell-Mitchell are stepping down this summer after 20 seasons of leadership. Morehead's husband, pianist and conductor Philip Morehead, handed the administrative reins over to clarinetist Christie Miller last year, and Miller will take up the artistic job as well next season. Although Miller, unlike Patricia Morehead and Misurell-Mitchell, is not a composer herself, she is a longtime member of their ensemble and shares their values.

Friday night's concert at Merit School of Music's excellent Gottlieb Hall in the West Loop was curated by Patricia Morehead as her own summing up. (Misurell-Mitchell has put together a jazz and clarinet summit with members of Chicago's AACM for May 11 at Roosevelt's Ganz Hall downtown as her adieu.) Dubbed "Viola Fantasy," it did not neglect oboe, either, and the evening opened with the world premiere of veteran New York composer Eleanor Cory's quintet "Mood Swing," showcasing Morehead on not only oboe but its siblings, the oboe d'amore and the English horn.

For anyone who knows the Moreheads, it was clear that the manic activity of the music, what Cory called "musical roller coasters," was an affectionate portrait of this leading couple of Chicago's contemporary music scene.

Other highlights included new works by two of Morehead's former students including Sam Cole, who worked with Morehead at Merit while a student at Whitney Young High School. Now in his sophomore year at Oberlin College and Conservatory in Ohio, Cole is already going places with his simultaneously playful and intellectual compositions. His "The Unbearable Lightness of Being ... a Composer" for oboe, clarinet, trombone and percussion paid tribute to the irony of the Milan Kundera novel while also carrying traces of such Central European-inspired modernist composers as Robert Kurka and Kurt Weill.

Fekete's own commission, "Divertimento Celebration C-U-B-E" (2007), is a tight four-movement suite with great humor and technical challenges -- the scoring is for viola, flute, oboe, trumpet and piano -- that also features a remarkably beautiful cantabile music as well as two breakneck prestos. Fekete will be spending the summer in Chicago on a Hungarian fellowship, and the local music community will benefit from his residency.

Frequent CUBE violist Frank Babbitt played a key role in the evening's program both as performer and curator of works for his own neglected instrument. A member of the Lyric Opera of Chicago Orchestra, Babbitt gave a moving performance of Morehead's own 1987 "Elegy" and of the late William Ferris' more conventional 1997 "Lux Aeterna" with flutist Claudia Cryer. He also gave a sample of his own collaborations with humor-oriented composers and poets with the brief but hilarious "Moth's Wing" from his graduate school days with composer Kurt Coble and a text by the late Scottish poet Ivor Cutler.

And Babbitt collaborated, too, in the realization of a new work by his own son, Ben Babbitt, 18, who will be entering Roosevelt in the fall. "Frankincense Immediate" for viola and electronics (executed by the younger Babbitt) is a portrait of the young composer as a curious listener to and shaper of sounds. Sharp, witty, and enticing stuff.

Lawrence Axelrod's "Duo Concertante," revised and trimmed in 1996 from its initial 1987 version, still gives the impression of too much heft and activity, but it was finely navigated by violist Claudia Lasareff-Mironoff and Axelrod on piano. In contrast, "Tropes IV," a 1990 work for solo piano, is a set of etched gems by the late University of Chicago-trained composer Jorge Liderman. Played with perfection and appropriate understatement by Philip Morehead, the work commemorated its maker, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley who committed suicide in the Bay Area last month at 50. The whole program was dedicated to Liderman's memory, a gesture typical of the warm embrace CUBE gives to all members of its very extended family.

Andrew Patner is critic-at-large for WFMT-FM (98.7).