

Report: eighth blackbird at Oberlin

November 11 in Finney Chapel

Members of Oberlin's Contemporary Music Ensemble were up for some stiff competition as they shared the Finney Chapel stage with eighth blackbird last Tuesday. The elder ensemble (Oberlin graduates of a dozen years ago) has achieved a splendid reputation for its encouragement of living composers and its performances of their music. The idea of combining eighth blackbird with current members of the ensemble in which they got their start was both brilliant and risky. Could the present-day Obies measure up?



A large audience definitely thought so, cheering and stomping their feet after the finale of this performance, where the dozen, cleverly intermixed musicians made seemingly effortless work of the minimalist demands of Steve Reich's Double Sextet. Frequently played by eighth blackbird against an overdubbing of themselves, the work received its first-ever live performance tonight. The combined discipline of the ensemble was astonishing, and anyone who thinks this style of music is easy should try their hand at one of the piano parts (repetitive motion syndrome is an inherent risk).

The perfectly balanced program for the evening also began with cheering and stomping as Oberlin cellist Ted Rankin-Parker came onstage to position himself in front of a large video screen for Reich's Cello Counterpoint. The multi-tracked score (one live, seven previously recorded) was adroitly synchronized with a video authored by Alexander Overington, who was also responsible for the sound design. Multi-media is also risky business, but Overington's surreal and sometimes goofy images of Rankin-Parker playing the cello in unlikely places (on a tractor, on the ice, in the front seat of a car) further enhanced Reich's already attractive score.

The centerpiece of the concert, Frederic Rzewski's Knight, Death, and Devil, based on an Albrecht Dürer engraving, was a world premiere, commissioned by the Oberlin Conservatory. Highly varied in texture and instrumentation, the work was accompanied by somewhat dark and brooding program notes by the composer which belied the actually rather cheerful tone of much of the music. Two dramatic moments were provided by eighth blackbird's percussionist, Matthew Duvall, who had a set of gleaming metal garbage cans to bang on. At one point, seemingly losing his mind, he reduced a set of china crockery to shards by tossing them one by one into a can, finally rattling the debris around and dumping it on the stage. In another moment, he made remarkably strange sounds by drawing a rope through a hole in the bottom of another can, as well as producing other startling effects from his hardware. Speaking of strange sounds, the sextet, joined by an Oberlin student string quartet, were made to vocalize bizzarely as well as play their instruments in one movement. The work came to a surprising conclusion with a pointillistic piano solo played by Lisa Kaplan while the other instrumentalists stepped back as if in homage. This is a piece one could listen to again and again.

The fourth work in this Rzewski sandwich was his 1968 mathematical puzzle, Les Moutons de Panurge. Matt Albert, eighth blackbird's violinist, explained the complicated process by which the musicians would play a series of 65 notes in a strict and subtractive order and perhaps one would go astray like a sheep and lead the others along. Again, the rhythmic discipline of eighth blackbird was remarkable as all six players made their tortuous but mesmerizing way through the series, eventually pulling apart and then all coming to rest on a final note which seemed to vanish into nowhere in the rapt silence of Finney Chapel. No coughing during the music tonight, which says a lot.

Although it didn't happen on Tuesday night, a separate ovation was due for Tim Weiss, director of the Oberlin Contemporary Ensemble, who first organized the group now known as eighth blackbird, encouraged them to stay together, and continues to do amazing work with Oberlin musicians.