

Jay Harvey Upstage

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Butler Artsfest: Music of the 20th and 21st centuries makes its vital presence felt in festival programming

Last Sunday afternoon at **Butler Artsfest**, a lucky audience heard a splendid performance of George Crumb's 1974 "Music for a Summer Evening."



The Devil (as lepidopterist) sizes up the fiddling Soldier in Butler production.

But the festival was by no means finished so soon with modern and contemporary works: In the jazz sphere, there will be Donny McCaslin's appearance with the university's jazz ensemble Saturday night. That morning, the Butler Percussion Ensemble, true to the heart of the all-percussion repertoire, will go all modern. Unlike some arts festivals, this one is not wedded to the distant past.

The weekend was heralded Thursday by a program partnering a work by Butler Jordan College of the Arts dean Ronald Caltobiano with Igor Stravinsky's First World War fable, "The Soldier's Tale." Tonight, the **Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra** comes into the spotlight with a program including the premiere of James Aikman's "Triptych: Musical Momentum" and a turn-of-the-century bassoon concerto by Christopher Theofanidis that the ICO has done before. Music director Kirk Trevor will conduct.

I was invited to an ICO rehearsal Thursday morning to become acquainted with the Theofanidis and Aikman works. The process of preparation didn't permit me thorough exposure to either piece. Despite my pleasure in the virtuosity of Martin Kuuskmann, I didn't get much more of an impression of Theofanidis' 1997/2002 Bassoon Concerto than the sense that it is, at least in part, a muscular work. It exploits the solo instrument in all registers while keeping the orchestra busy and occasionally menacing, as if spurring the bassoonist on to ever greater heroics.

With Aikman's "Triptych," I had the benefit of following the score and hearing all three movements, though not in performance order. The second movement, "The Particle Garden," features a complicating overlay in the form of prerecorded audio that wasn't used in this rehearsal. Without those sounds supplementing the orchestra's activity, including (the composer said) a children's choir, "The Particle Garden" had a simple open-air lyricism reminiscent of the gentler sections of Aaron Copland's "Red Pony" Suite or his "Down a Country Lane."

The last movement, "Fanfare," struck me as a sophisticated example of building up a fanfare mood without tipping the compositional hand too early. The proportions are great: After a rattling full-orchestra climax, for instance, is brought to the edge of annoyance, there's a relaxed, playful episode for clarinets and bassoons at just the right time. The insertion of contrasting material in long notes toward the climax subtly avoids undercutting the mounting fanfare glory.



James Aikman displays a straightforward orchestral voice in "Triptych."

Aikman is apparently a composer who doesn't like to contradict himself or struggle with a synthesis: The music always aims at clarity, making a beeline for its stated goal. Any complexity is apparently designed to help you understand the essential thrust of each movement. In the first movement, a canny application of the variations principle sounded more admirable than what it's applied to: The theme, while useful for Aikman's purposes, seemed too self-effacing, almost inert. I look forward to another hearing of this work someday.

The other new (to me) Butler Artsfest work I heard opened Thursday's concert at the Schrott Center: Caltobiano's 1992 "Lines from Poetry" for solo violin. Davis Brooks' performance had nobility and expressive stature. The work's nine movements were accompanied in this performance by Jordan Munson's video art.

The latter contribution means the lines, mostly from English and American poets, past and present, are presented on screen in jostled, partially faded, teasingly semi-legible forms. The quotations are heralded, surrounded and sometimes overtaken by colorful abstract imagery, supporting Caltobiano's intention to address the words' atmosphere rather than respond to their literal significance. The visual addition removes some of the etude-like abstractness of the paces Caltobiano puts the violinist through. (The understated appeal of the music may have been too much for someone: loud snoring could be heard beginning in the sixth movement.)

I was enthralled particularly by the fifth movement, with its evocation of an "old Venetian piazza," in which a recitative-like line resembles an aged visitor's favorite half-remembered song from long ago. Also fetching were the tension and mystery — signaled by a tremolo opening — of the seventh movement's reference to "moving back and forwards through time." The "call of the morn" in the finale cast a hovering spell through ascending long tones in harmonics.

It's hard to speak highly enough of the performance of "The Soldier's Tale." I've known this work from recordings since my early teens, and am almost absurdly prejudiced in its favor. Fortunately, the performance pleased me in every respect: the fully professional instrumental ensemble, conducted by Stanley DeRusha, couldn't have sounded more fit — though perhaps pushed to the limit in "Ragtime" and "Triumphal Dance" near the end.

With credit to Owen Schaub's direction, the piece's staging was imaginative and consistently supportive of the powerful narrative process: the deluded soldier's falling into the devil's trap. Elysia Rohn made for an engaging Narrator, with Nick Gehrich and Peyton Lustig vividly portraying the fateful struggle between the Soldier and his powerful nemesis. Sarah Tam filled out the cast in the small but poignant role of the Princess.

Six dancers gave elaboration through well-designed movement to Stravinsky's idiosyncratic evocation of three dance forms: Tango, Waltz and Ragtime. They form the healing suite the Soldier offers by way of cure to the king's daughter, thus winning her hand in marriage.

The couple's happiness is short-lived. The story's pessimistic outcome offers the durable moral that the best things about our past and our present are difficult to combine happily at the same time. Hard enough, it's true, but not as impossible as it is once you've made a pact with the Devil. The fact that the grim lesson of "The Soldier's Tale" is so entertaining is simply a bonus.