

Jay Harvey Upstage

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Butler Artsfest: Music and characters, from here to the stars

Instrumental music is sometimes called "abstract" — as if something had been *drawn out of* it by its creator. But much accomplished music of this kind has something *put into* it. It's a salutary tribute to music's expressive malleability.

Reptiles and rogues, plodding hard-shell turtles and plodding soft-shell pianists — all these and many more have been subject to compositional ingenuity. Somehow we recognize the characters, even though nothing in notes has fur, feathers, testudinal protection, or a gift for mischief.

In a Sunday matinee concert of the current [Artsfest at Butler University](#), we got blithe depictions of a legendary scamp in Richard Strauss' "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks " and animals — anthropomorphized, as the accompanying light verse reminded the audience — in Camille Saint-Saens' "Carnival of the Animals."

In case the famous pictorial vivacity of those two works seemed too close to home, after intermission the [Schrott Center for the Arts](#) audience was treated to a mind-bending view of the cosmos with a spectacular performance of George Crumb's "Music for a Summer Evening (Makrokosmos III)."

If only the concert's first half had been anywhere near the level of the second. There were momentary delights in "Carnival of the Animals," and adroit, unanimous command of the featured instruments — adjacent pianos played by Jeeyoon Kim and D.J. Smith. But both the introduction and finale gave conspicuous indication that a conductor was needed; in fact, it seemed doubtful that a nonplaying coach or adviser had ever been present in rehearsal, balances were so variable.

Some of the solos offered full-blooded renderings of the animals concerned: David Murray's double-bass in "The Elephant," Shawn Goodman's clarinet in "Hens and Cocks" (the title's second noun is usually rendered "Roosters" in deference to American squeamishness), Jon Crabiel's xylophone in "Fossils."

But ensemble weakness, from Larry Shapiro's first violin on down, put all the burden of zestful continuity upon the adept pianists. The performance didn't seem so much underrehearsed as underdirected. Even the bows were maladroit; the pianists should have been brought forward for their own bow in between group bows. And when there's a stage crew, musicians should learn to leave their music on the stands after acknowledging the applause. Who was in charge here?

Frank Felice recited Ogden Nash's lively verse portrayals with apt gestures and inflections,

though he spoiled several exact end-rhymes — so essential to Nash's comic effects — by making them approximate: Why have the rooster, said to resemble a hoodlum, identifiable by its cry of "Cock-a-doodle-doodlium" instead of "-doodlum"?

Next came a 10-minute version of Strauss's famous tone poem about a legendary German annoyance. It showed the benefits of well-coordinated chamber-music performance, though there was mixed quality within the ensemble, which consisted of Shapiro, Murray, Goodman, Gail Lewis (horn) and Doug Spaniol (bassoon). The overall effect was more careful, even labored, than nonchalantly prankish, putting the musical characterization of Till Eulenspiegel in peril.

What a relief to contemplate the heavens, though with plenty of allusions to earthbound religious and ritual responses to the night sky, in Crumb's piece for four players! The carefulness of two pianists and two percussionists in mastering this variegated piece never got in the way of full-spectrum expressivity.

The "fifth player," whose cooperation was of course fully dependent on the human quartet, was the hall itself. The performance offered a beautiful display of the Schrott Center's acoustics.

Pianists Anna Briscoe and Kate Boyd and percussionists Crabiel and Heather Sloan knew how to place and project their shouts and whistling, their piano-string-tweaking and offstage slide-whistling, alongside more conventional skills. They were attentive to the score's ever-shifting demands and to each other, ranging over a universe of sounds. Their intensity seemed to compel rapt audience attention: If you heard a pin drop, it was probably put there by Crumb.

Speaking of pins, it's hard to pinpoint what was most outstanding here — the intimidating, clangorous march of "The Advent," the pseudo-anthropological survey that stretched the artists' professional aplomb to the limit in "Myth," or the implied expansion of the space-time continuum in the finale, "Music of the Starry Night." Its scrupulously extruded diminuendo at the end was oddly reminiscent of one of the highlights of "Carnival of the Animals" — Saint-Saens' witty conclusion to his Offenbach slow-mo parody in a deliciously stretched-out final cadence.

Q.E.D.: Definition of character in music has a usefully broad reach, from poky tortoises to the never-ending aftermath of the Big Bang in which we are all held loosely.

