



A Weekend of the New, in Off-Radar Spots

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Traditionally, Santa Barbara’s serious music calendar slouches towards vacation mode in early August, timed with the end the Music academy of the West summer bounty, and springing back to life with October’s new concert season-opening games. It’s a perennial way of cultural life here.

But imagine the delight, surprise, and head-scratching joy when contemporary music lovers were treated to two separate new music soirees last weekend, and in unexpected venues/contexts. Saturday night belonged to the eagerly-awaited opening of “Ari Benjamin Meyers: Kunsthalle for Music,” composer-concocter Meyers’ conceptually gamy art-space-as-concert-space project, making its U.S. premiere at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara.

And on Friday night, the Central Library’s Faulkner Gallery was made safe for freshly-cooked New Music when the LA-based (and Santa Barbara-born) Now Hear Ensemble performed a batch of enticing new scores ala the Arctic. To back up a bit: the project “Composing in the Wilderness Arctic Adventure” (founded by composer Stephen Lias [link](#)) involved a group of seven composers trekking to the remote Gates of the Arctic National Park, and including composer/UCSB professor Leslie Hogan, all of whom wrote pieces inspired by the experience. Said inspirations led some to a lyrical place (as with Hogan and Kayla Roth) to bracing and/or meditative abstraction (Simon Eastwood and Stephen Hennessey) or pluralistic impressions (Alex Nohai-Seaman and Cody Westheimer) and, finally, sounds from the warm ‘n’ fuzzy documentary soundtrackland (Brian Metolius).

Taken in tandem, the two-nights of a new music burst downtown gave the blissful impression—however deceptive —that Santa Barbara is ripe turf for contemporary music. Could this anomaly seed an eventual reality? Hope is cheap.

At MCASB, the art on view and in the sonic air (through November 3) is living, breathing, musically live and morphing within gallery walls. The young and gifted seven-member ensemble, mostly out of the alternative conservatory that is CalArts, will be performing for four hours a day/five days a week, in what is new museum director of Abaseh Marvali’s fourth and most ambitious show yet in her tenure in the 805.

For historical perspective, the project is, in effect, a latter-day continuation and heir apparent to the the ‘80s/early ‘90s when this very contemporary art space (then known by its original moniker, Contemporary Arts Forum, aka CAF) engaged in the then fairly common practice of blurring the line between art and art music. It was a time when Laurie Anderson brought her prepared violin and narrative tactics to perform in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and when CAF hosted such respected new music mavericks as Carl Stone, Scott Johnson, Paul Dresher, Malcolm Goldstein, and Phill Niblock. The practice of presenting music in this space, except as party favors or as reception wallpaper, went dormant for many years... until last Saturday night.

Meyers, a Brooklyn-er in Berlin, has assembled a large and willfully diverse repertoire for his “Kunsthalle,” including John Cage, Erik Satie, John Baldessari, Julius Eastman, Charles Ives, Philip Glass, emerging composers, and Meyer’s own concept-lubed inventions. Meyer’s fare on Saturday night, for instance, included “Untitled, for Choir,” a silent piece in which all the musicians are transformed into synchronize conductors (an orchestral musician’s fever dream come true?).

Saturday night’s opening two-hour performance was, fittingly, a representative variety plate of goods. The music was scored and improvised, and sometimes both, leaning towards the friendly pitter-patter of Minimalist lingo—while also poking fun at the fashionable M-word. My favorite, laugh-out-loud moment came when the quartet performed Philip Glass’ blandly bandying *Two Pages*: a subversive Dadaistic/Fluxus moment arrived when three other musicians showed up armed with rolls of gauze, proceeding to wrap the musicians and their instruments, and effectively squelching and smothering the music. (Considering how often I have wanted to ixnay a performance of Glass’ nattering inanities, I had a surrogate high here.)

As they will for the next six weeks in residence, the “Kunsthalle” gang of seven will remain in motion while performing—in terms of positioning around the gallery and in terms of idiom. At one point, the musicians cohered into an actual art-pop band, of sorts, realizing the moody lilt of music by Sung Hwan Kim and David Michael DiGregorio.

But then, by radical contrast, along came the friendly chaotic mayhem of Jonathan Bepler’s piece, giving the musicians license to meander freely and behave anarchically. Some players ran through scales, facing up against the walls. A woman perched on the floor fretfully fiddling with a hurdy gurdy, while her colleague manically moved and abused music stands, as if obsessed (that gesture was reminiscent of the deconstructionist finale of Patricia Kopatchinskaja’s “Bye Bye Beethoven” at the 2018 Ojai Music Festival). Yet another musician stared point blank at an explanatory wall text and yelled “Stop. Stop. Stop...”

In all, it was a delicious descent into absurdity in the name of music, followed by Meyers’ gentle a cappella benediction, as the singers slowly intoned “music... Is... not... music.” Well, it is, and it isn’t, in artful degrees.

The enlightened (mis)adventure continues, almost daily.

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<http://www.nowhearensemble.com>



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What’s Up and On in the 805

A few highlights of recommended upcoming events—on stages, gallery walls, screens, etc.—in the Santa Barbara area...

–[MCASB](#), *Ari Benjamin Meyers: Kunsthalle for Music*, at (see post)

–[SBMA](#): New vintage photography exhibition at SB Museum of Art, continuing their tradition of a smart institutional eye on the medium: [Salt & Silver: Early Photography, 1840–1860](#), September 8 – December 8