

New Composers and New Sounds Converge in Buffalo

June in Buffalo at the University at Buffalo

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BUFFALO — In a lecture on Saturday morning for an audience of student composers at Baird Hall on the [University at Buffalo](#) campus, [Robert Beaser](#) offered a brief but detailed overview of the travails of writing his *Guitar Concerto* (2009). Mr. Beaser, one of four faculty members in town to preside over master classes at the [June in Buffalo](#) new-music festival, spoke of agonizing over the concerto for a decade. He still considers the work unfinished, he said, and just last week he spent four hours with the guitarist [Eliot Fisk](#), for whom it was written, tweaking the solo guitar line.

Mr. Beaser's problems were practical. The guitar sings so quietly, even in the hands of a high-energy player like Mr. Fisk, that it is nearly impossible to make it heard over a full orchestra, particularly when the scoring is as colorful and outgoing as Mr. Beaser's tends to be.

That, in turn, is a recipe for a work that will not be performed often, a prospect no composer finds exciting.

You could hear the issues Mr. Beaser described, as well as his solutions, when JoAnn Falletta led the [Buffalo Philharmonic](#) and Mr. Fisk in a powerful but not entirely successful performance of the work at Lippes Concert Hall on Sunday afternoon. Mr. Beaser is right: The guitar cannot compete with the orchestra, and the solution — amplification — yielded a tinny, colorless guitar sound, atypical of Mr. Fisk's work.

Nor did it address the problem completely. The guitar's best material comes when it's heard on its own, between orchestral expostulations. When the orchestra performed at full throttle, the guitar writing was mostly accompanimental. At times the concerto seemed like two independent pieces played simultaneously: an idiomatic display piece for solo guitar and a big-boned neo-Romantic essay for orchestra.



Signal, led by Brad Lubman, performing *Impatience* (2005) by Julia Wolfe, an accompaniment to a 1920s film, at the June in Buffalo festival. Photo by Irene Haupt.

The rest of the concert — the festival’s closing event — was devoted to short but inspired works by the three other faculty composers. [David Felder](#), the festival’s director, contributed “Incendio” (2000), a zesty, transparent work for brass ensemble, arranged from a 1987 choral work. You could hear the vocal contours of the instrumental lines, but they sounded thoroughly natural in this brass version, which the Buffalo musicians played with infectious vigor.

[Fred Lerdahl](#)’s “Cross Currents” (1987) and [Steven Stucky](#)’s “Jeu de Timbres” (2003), both for full orchestra, had bright hues and rhythmic intricacy in common but otherwise explored different territory. Mr. Lerdahl’s imaginative score developed an appealingly direct theme as it made its way through the sections of the orchestra, often with unusual decorative touches. A brisk, melodically exotic percussion figure, for example, sounded like a sped-up gamelan. Mr. Stucky’s piece, by contrast, was a homage to Ravel, packed with shimmering string and woodwind textures yet with a changeability and bite that are among the most recognizable hallmarks of Mr. Stucky’s music.

[Louis Andriessen](#) and [Julia Wolfe](#) were to have joined the festival’s faculty as well, and they would have represented different versions of a post-Minimalist style otherwise absent. Mr. Andriessen withdrew several weeks ago because of a scheduling conflict, and Ms. Wolfe fell ill just before the festival began. But if they were not on hand to lecture and teach, their music was included in the festival’s programs, most notably in a concert by Signal, led by Brad Lubman, at Lippes Concert Hall on Saturday evening.

Ms. Wolfe’s “Impatience” (2005), an insistent, sometimes painterly accompaniment to a [peculiar film](#) of that name by the 1920s avant-garde director Charles Dekeukeleire, uses repeating figures and steady, tolling harp, percussion and piano pulses to evoke a tense emotional landscape, and odd touches like eerie accordion chords and sliding violin lines to create an otherworldly atmosphere. If those qualities seem conflicting, they capture the essence of Dekeukeleire’s primitive jump cuts and juxtapositions, and work splendidly on their own.

In “La Passione” (2002) Mr. Andriessen set six extracts from Dino Campana’s “Canti Orfici” (“Orphic Songs”) for soprano, solo violin and an orchestra augmented by electric guitar and bass, cimbalom and synthesizer. You have to admire the vividness of Mr. Andriessen’s scoring, particularly the brilliant brass and percussion writing, which sizzles, growls, thumps and stabs, always in emotional sync with the Campana texts.

Courtney Orlando played the solo violin line as a focused counterpart to the soprano. And Jamie Jordan sang with alluring clarity, at least in the sections where she could be heard over the ensemble. Perhaps the festival should consider presenting a seminar on the pitfalls of writing for soloists and orchestra.

Earlier on Saturday, at Baird Hall, members of Signal and the New York New Music Ensemble played works by 4 of the 25 student composers who are participating in the festival. You could hardly have wanted greater variety. Dimitar Pentchev's "1:05" (2012), for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, begins haltingly but evolves into a driven, tight-knit conversation in which all four instruments have ample time in the spotlight and difficult, showy lines to play.

Yeung-Ping Chen's "Light and Tear" (2012) proved a spare but appealing fantasy for solo violin, and Eun Young Lee's "Mool" (2012), for solo piano, was etched in Impressionistic harmonies and splashes of Ravelian color. Taken together with Mr. Stucky's "Jeu de Timbres," it was a reminder that for composers of a certain stripe the early-20th-century French style is more potent than ever.

June in Buffalo offered relatively little of the indie classical style, but a hint of it came through in the last of the student works, Andres Carrizo's "We Guide the Birth of Waves" (2012) for electric guitar (complete with distortion pedals) and percussion (gongs and vibraphone, mainly). Mr. Carrizo builds fragmentary figures into involved melodies, and if he indulges in a bit of edible noodling along the way, the work's final section is worth the journey.

A concert by the Genkin Philharmonic at the Burchfield Penney Art Center on Friday also offered a glimpse of alt-classical flexibility. The ensemble is essentially a jazz band, with two trumpets, saxophone, trombone, violin, keyboards, guitar, bass and two percussionists. Some of the program was art-rock, with three Frank Zappa works included. But mostly the group offered its freely improvisatory, virtuosic (and after a while, similar-sounding) takes on Bartok, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Webern and Schoenberg.

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