

Music in Small Spaces

Small-scale series bring new sounds closer to audiences

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(excerpted from review of multiple performance groups)

In the music world, most of the attention goes to the mega-venues: Keller Auditorium, Moda Center, Schnitzer Concert Hall, arena shows. Yet most of the creativity seems to happen in more intimate confines. Maybe it's something to do with focus or informality or even lower ticket prices, but for me, cozy clubs, chapels, galleries, small auditoriums somehow make it easier to connect to what's happening onstage.

That's why I've cherished **Music in Small Spaces**, which for the past six years has presented new and unusual music in Beaverton and other towns on the west side of Portland's West Hills (Tualatin Mountains), and Third Angle New Music's Studio Series and Porch Music, which bring mostly new sounds to inner Southeast Portland's Zoomtopia studios and the front porches of homes in a leafy old Northeast Portland neighborhood.

Alas, MiSS's indefatigable majordomo, Judy Castle, has announced that last week's concert, at Portland's ironically not-so-small Village Baptist Church, will be the last in the series — a big loss for the West Side and for Oregon music in general. The final two performances, as well as Third Angle's season-ending (but thankfully not series-ending) show last week show just why these spaces are so valuable. And while it won't be in a small space, you will have the chance to see a reprise of the final MiSS show **this Sunday** in downtown Portland.
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MiSS's April 23 concert brought together two of Oregon's most valuable instrumentalists. Eugene-based **Koto** virtuosa Mitsuki Dazai is the state's primary exponent of the Japanese zither, while Ashland-

based flutist Tessa Brinckman has long been one of Oregon's most persuasive proponents and performers of contemporary music, especially by Oregon composers, including Portland composer **Jack Gabel**. His lovely *Through a Gentle Rain*, inspired by walks in a Portland park, opened the show with its seemingly incompatible mixture of American blues, contemporary classical and traditional Japanese music that somehow sounds delectably natural in Brinckman's hands. Dazai used the technique of slapping the koto strings while Brinckman deployed two different flutes and piccolo. (It's available on their scintillating North Pacific Music album **Glass Sky** by East-West Continuo.)



Dazai & Brinckman.

Like **so many other recent Oregon new music shows**, this one mixed words (specifically poetry) and music to good effect. (Unfortunately, I had to miss **Sound of Late's** fisher poets-meet-new-music concert a few days later.) Brinckman proved to be an uncommonly engaging reader. Ichiro Higo's *Kangen Hisho* occupied a darker emotional landscape than Gabel's, in keeping with Ojibwe poet Heid Erdrich's angry *The Theft Outright (after Frost)* about American injustice to its Native peoples.

Brinckman used flutter tonguing, long held notes and other techniques in J-pop musician Hiroshi Morikawa's lyrical *Time Goes By*. And she employed multiple flutes again in Yuji Takahashi's *Horse's Heads Were Towards Eternity*, interpolating musical passages between stanzas of Emily Dickinson's famous *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, and somehow making it sound like a Japanese poem.

Dazai swished a wooden dowel over her koto's strings to evoke a windy sound in Australian composer Jim Franklin's *A Lattice of Winds*, which made a fine match for 2014 MacArthur Fellow **Terrance Hayes**'s fiercely ardent, incantatory *Wind in a Box*. Sometimes rising from her stool and perching like a spider, stretching to reach the farthest extremes of her instrument, Dazai alternated jabbing phrases with swirling passages, with sections growing shorter and shorter to build momentum to the end. In the opening of John Kaizan Neptune's *5+13=Prime Number*, she damped and otherwise manipulated the strings to humorous effect, while Brinckman read Carl Sandburg's poem about a character obsessed with numbers, before picking up the flute to engage in Indian-music like imitative duets with Dazai before the music grooved into a regular beat that brought the delightful concert home on a joyful note.

If Northwest composers can continue to write audience-friendly yet forward looking music like this, we could be seeing the emergence of a new style of contemporary classical music that can reach beyond the niche audience of new music aficionados. It's a shame that they won't be able to find it in the always rewarding Music in Small Spaces series anymore, so let's hope that Judy Castle eventually brings something like it back in some form. Oregon and contemporary classical music need intimate spaces for this kind of broadly appealing new music, Oregon audiences deserve to hear it, and we're lucky to have Cascadia Composers around to generate it.