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MUSIC REVIEW

Music With and Without Musicians

By STEVE SMITH

The primary focus of the MATA Festival, a vital annual new-music series, is on fresh sounds fashioned by young creators. But not every piece requires live performers: sound installations and electronic music also factor into the mix. The first formal concert of MATA's 12th season was held on Tuesday night at [Le Poisson Rouge](#), the Greenwich Village nightclub. But the festivities had actually started the night before, when Matt Wright, an English composer and improviser, activated his "Totem for Gobi — New York" in the club's Gallery Bar.

Inspired by a trek through the Gobi Desert, Mr. Wright used a turntable, a laptop computer and other effects to blend the recorded chanting and growling of Mongolian singers, peeling and scraping bell sounds, vinyl crackle and electronic rumble, all played through speakers positioned around the room. Even with synthetic sounds in the mix, the piece evoked a wind-swept, spirit-haunted expanse, an effect bolstered by Gobi images projected and altered on two video screens.

Mr. Wright's installation, which is alternating with other new electronic pieces in the bar area through Thursday night, is largely self-sustaining, with audience members using computer track pads installed on the bar to modify the sounds being produced. But for 40 minutes on Monday Mr. Wright took control of his gear for a duet with Evan Parker, a prodigious English improviser, whose chirrups and flurries on soprano saxophone neatly meshed with the swirls and flutters of Mr. Wright's turntable.

Yet for all the technological savvy on display in the bar, Tuesday's concert by the superb Calder Quartet showed that the time-honored string quartet format still provides fertile ground for innovation and surprise in the hands of imaginative, skillful creators. That description fit all four composers represented on the program, though some pieces worked better than others.

"Cythère (a trauma ballet in two parts)" by Lisa R. Coons, made a powerful first impression. After an ultraviolet opening movement of flamboyantly choreographed thrusts, jabs and parries, a slow second movement murmured with a profoundly hollow, almost tactile numbness: an eerie sensation as much felt as heard.

“Singing and Dancing” by Fabian Svensson, a Swedish composer absent because of volcano-related complications, lived up to its title literally. In the first section simple scales (and tone-deaf incursions by one player or another) coalesced into a wistful, almost elegiac melody. The second part featured an insistent bouncy rhythm reminiscent of [Beethoven](#)’s Grosse Fuge. While the piece made its points long before it ended, it was hard to begrudge such frolicsome company.

Nathan Davis’s “Skrzyp Skrzyn” (Polish for “The Creaking of Chests,” Mr. Davis explained in an onstage interview) evoked childhood violin lessons with a fantastical litany of squeaks and squeals, followed by a warm, wooly thicket of resonating overtones. (The club’s characteristically sensitive, well-managed amplification was especially appreciated here.)

In Daniel Wohl’s “Glitch” flaws of recorded media — stutters, pops, crackles and further sonic detritus — inspired fragmentary lines and noisy abrasions performed by the Calder members over recorded string sounds played from a laptop. Mr. Wohl’s ingenuity was evident, but only the last movement, “I Drone,” seemed to run deeper than the cleverness at its surface.

The MATA Festival concludes on Thursday night with the Argento Chamber Ensemble at Le Poisson Rouge, 158 Bleecker Street, near Thompson Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 505-3474, lepoissonrouge.com.

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