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Music

Performance at Atlas made a good case for new music. Too bad no one heard it.



By **Anne Midgette** Classical music critic/The Classical Beat January 31 at 3:15 PM

There is an audience for new music in Washington — witness the crowds that filled the John Cage Centennial Festival a couple of years ago. But for whatever reason, the Atlas Performing Arts Center hasn't figured out how to find it.

On Friday night, Neil Rolnick, a leading figure of the New York downtown composers scene, along with pianist Kathleen Supové and the young cellist Ashley Bathgate, both new-music stars, performed a memorable concert of Rolnick's music at the Atlas — to a mere handful of people.

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The Atlas tried for a couple of seasons to establish itself as a new-music bulwark with one of the more imaginative such series around, inviting leading lights from across the country — So Percussion, International Contemporary Ensemble, Roomful of Teeth (which Washington Performing Arts is bringing to the city again in February). Few of these concerts, fine as many of them were, attracted much of an audience. Friday's concert was one remaining vestige of that ambitious series, without any sense that the Atlas's current administration cares much about whether anybody attends — or even whether anybody could hear well: Someone, presumably a technician or other Atlas employee, kept having conversations somewhere in the building that were audible through a door at the top of the auditorium that no one bothered to close.

It's a shame, because it was, overall, a terrific concert. Rolnick plays with the lines between computer and acoustic music, and the program, called "Ex Machina," offered two works for solo laptop and two pieces in which the computer played in duet with Supové and Bathgate. The laptop pieces, though, were entirely as engaging as the acoustic ones — Rolnick played them from a keyboard, with the laptop set up behind it — as well as nicely contrasting. "WakeUp" involved samples from two Everly Brothers songs ("Wake Up, Little Susie" and "Dream"), merging and melding into each other and in and

out of various shadings of dreamlike states as the sound paced back and forth across the stage from one speaker to another. “O Brother!” took music that Rolnick played with his own brother, a folk musician, and made it Rolnick’s own, less a homage than an appropriation showing how a computer interprets folk tunes.

Both of the acoustic solos were tours de force that bore a slight whiff of works in progress. Bathgate is a glorious cellist, and for her piece, “Cello ex machina,” Rolnick stepped away entirely and let her play the computer and cello at the same time, by means of foot controls that took phrases she played and continued to bounce them around her live music, sending her into duet with versions of herself as if she were a sun (with her warm, glowing melodic lines) surrounded by an ever-growing number of musical orbits, individual notes pinging and ponging around her. Supové’s piece, “Dynamic RAM and Concert Grand,” played with Rolnick, was longer, more episodic and felt a little more unfinished, as if both artists were still feeling their way, though the narrative flow was never lost as Supové grooved and danced over a piano part that called for everything from honky-tonk to improvisation.

I know there are a lot of people in Washington who would have loved this music, as I did. If only the Atlas could get the word to them.

Notable future new-music events at the Atlas Performing Arts Center include “[The Ceiling Floats Away](#)” by Matthew Burtner and the composer Rita Dove, on Feb. 28, part of the center’s Intersections Festival.

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