

The Washington Post

East Meets West, Twice



The Todd Reynolds Quartet and the Music from China Ensemble performed at the Freer Gallery on Saturday night, one of two programs that blended Chinese and Western Music. (by Jody Elff)

By Anne Midgette
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, October 5, 2009

The music world is thinking seriously about China. This seemed to be the message of two season-opening concerts in Washington this weekend. Both the Folger Consort and the concert series at the Sackler and Freer Galleries juxtaposed Western and Chinese instruments and music: the Folger Consort in a concert of music four centuries old, the Sackler/Freer series in a contemporary performance hosted by the composer himself.

(...)

The Freer program on Saturday night was devoted to a single, Western composer: [Neil Rolnick](#). The China connection was his piece "The Economic Engine," written in 2008 for Chinese and Western instruments and recently issued on CD with the same performers who appeared here: the Todd Reynolds Quartet, made up of heavy hitters from the New York new-music scene, and the ensemble Music From China. Rolnick's music is a vivid and vigorous hybrid of idioms including, but not limited to, minimalism (in its blocks of repeated patterns of sound), electronics (in feeding the live sounds of instruments through the computer) and blues (in a homage to Robert Johnson, a sampler of digital refractions of the great bluesman's music). None of those labels quite encapsulates the solid vitality of the whole. "Shadow Quartet," a string quartet, began with the instruments locked in individual gestures, and flowered at times into pure melody, passed from the violist (new-music notable Nadia Sirota) to the second violin (Courtney Orlando of the group Alarm Will Sound). The traditional Chinese part of the evening introduced works for pipa (played by Sun Li with a lighter, more elastic touch than Yang Wei's forceful one the night before) and erhu (a bowed, stringed instrument), which Rolnick later refracted into the larger whole of "The Economic Engine." This piece examined, critically, the current East-West interaction and the state of modern China. In four movements with titles like "Farm to Factory," it is an ambitious if not quite amalgamated work of what one might call musical photojournalism. The Western and Chinese instruments sometimes met in uneasy duets, and sometimes clashed head-on, leaving the remnants of their sounds in piles of electronic splinters -- thanks to Rolnick's processing -- behind them.

Although one program represented "new music" and the other "early music," the traditional Chinese works on both seemed more or less equivalent. They represent a venerable tradition, to be sure, but also an oral one, and one that is (as both concerts showed) eminently adaptable. This sense of music as a living activity rather than a fixed entity, committed to paper and set in stone, could do much to enliven Western concerts.