“...hypnotic...” – Wall St. Journal
"...compelling...Players Yarn/Wire - Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg (percussion, pump organ), Laura Barger and Ning Yu (piano) - give a pungent performance, full of drama and unrest." - The Wire (review of the Negotiation of Context)
"fearless" / "restlessly curious" / "spellbinding virtuosity" / "spare, strange, and very, very new" - TimeOut New York
"Metal pipes rapped with soft mallets rang like church bells and pinged like flagpoles; microphones waved to and fro made the sounds wobble and pulse. Gongs — two hidden offstage and two suspended from the ceiling — murmured and roared, saturating the resonant room." - New York Times
Yarn/Wire is a New York-based percussion and piano quartet (Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg, percussion / Laura Barger and Ning Yu, pianos). Noted for its “spellbinding virtuosity” (TimeOut NY) and “mesmerizing” performances (New York Times) the ensemble is admired for the energy and precision it brings to performances of today’s most adventurous music.

Founded in 2005, Yarn/Wire is dedicated to expanding the repertoire written for its instrumentation, through commissions and collaborative initiatives that aim to build a new and lasting body of work. Influenced by its members’ experiences with classical music, avant-garde theatre, and rock music, the ensemble champions a varied and probing repertoire.

In 2016, the ensemble won first prize in the open category as part of the inaugural M-Prize competition at the University of Michigan. More recently, it is has been honored by Stony Brook University as one of its “40 under 40” alumni who are leaders in their field.

Yarn/Wire has commissioned many American and international composers including Raphaël Cendo, Zosha Di Castri, Peter Evans, Michael Gordon, George Lewis, Alex Mincek, Thomas Meadowcroft, Misato Mochizuki, Tristan Murail, Sam Pluta, Kate Soper, and Øyvind Torvund. The group has given the United States premieres of works by Enno Poppe, Stefano Gervasoni, and Georg Friedrich Haas, among others. As well, the ensemble enjoys collaborations with genre-bending artists such as Tristan Perich, David Bithell, Sufjan Stevens, and Pete Swanson.

Yarn/Wire has recorded for the WERGO, Distributed Objects, Populist, and Carrier record labels in addition to maintaining their own imprint. Yarn/Wire appears internationally at prominent festivals and venues including the Lincoln Center Festival, BAM, New York’s Miller Theatre, River-to-River Festival, La MaMa Theatre, Festival of New American Music, London’s Barbican Centre, the Edinburgh International Festival, Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall, and Hong Kong New Music Ensemble’s Modern Academy. Their ongoing series, Yarn/Wire/Currents, serves as an incubator for new experimental music at ISSUE Project Room in Brooklyn, NY. Through these and other activities, including educational residencies and other outreach programs, Yarn/Wire works to promote new music in the United States. For more information, please visit: yarnwire.org
**Overview of Current Programs**

Each year, Yarn/Wire’s varied programs include concerts, university residencies, theater collaborations, and other educational activities. Following is a snapshot of the Yarn/Wire’s current programming:

- **Over 100 new works** by leading young American composers.
- First prize in the “open” category at the first M-Prize Chamber competition
- Major presentations at **Miller Theatre** (NYC) on the “Composer Portraits” and “PopUp” series.
- Performances at **BAM**, Brooklyn with Sufjan Stevens (January 2015)
- **Lincoln Center Festival** (Summer 2015)
- Ongoing collaborations with **Blank Forms** for the Yarn/Wire/Currents series.
- International Appearances at the **Barbican** (2015), **Edinburgh International Festival** (2015), **Shanghai Symphony Hall** (2016), and **Hong Kong Modern Academy** (2016), **Tectonics Festival UK** (2017), **Rainy Days Festival Luxembourg** (2017), **Ultima Festival Oslo** (2017), **Transit Festival Belgium** (2017), **Music Current Festival Dublin** (2018)
- United States Tours with appearances at the Southern Exposure Music Festival, Monday Evening Concerts Series (Los Angeles), Festival of New American Music (Sacramento), Davis, CA, Bowling Green (OH), Louisiana, Florida, Illinois, Kilbourn Concert Series, with university residencies at Harvard University, Brown University, Stanford, Columbia University, Princeton, and many more.
- Collaboration with the **Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf** (NY): Chamber-opera project- *You, My Mother* at La MaMa Experimental Theater and the River to River Festival (2013).
- Collaborations with **Leah Cox** (dancer-Bill T. Jones) and **Lawrence Mesich** (video artist, Cooper Union) interpreting Luciano Berio’s *Linea*.
- **Koussevitzky Commission** for a major new work by Tristan Murail.
- **Fromm Foundation** commission for a new work by Sam Pluta
- Releases on WERGO (Germany), Carrier (NYC), Distributed Objects (NYC) and Populist (Los Angeles) record labels.
- Chamber Music Institute and Festival co-sponsored by Stony Brook University (began summer 2016)
Yarn/Wire bring thoughtful brutality to Monday Evening Concerts

By Brandon Rolle (http://newclassic.la/author/brandon) | 01/16/2018 | 0

I want to talk to you about mud.

Not the sole-adorning, crossing-the-grass mud. I’m talking about thick, jailbroken swamp; the kind of mud that takes a full hand of fleshly, calloused fingers to scrape from your cheek. That was the raw, slopping sound world of Øyvind Torvund (http://oyvindtorvund.com/)’s “MudJam”—a rib-vibrating reminder that beneath the glyphs and tuplets and extramusical suggestion, music is just sound: simple, physical, shoved around by skin, wood, and metal. At the most recent installment of the Monday Evening Concert (http://www.mondayeveningconcerts.org/) series, each work demonstrated a different way this lug of air might communicate meaning; some works focused inward at the sonic material itself while others gazed outward towards their reflection in the world. The program impressed on me how sound, like dirt and water, can be molded to convey simplicity of form while its inner makeup remains impenetrably intimate—sound pooled into a castle whose form can be either admired or subjected to the impending tide. What the hell am I talking about? I have no idea. But I left Monday’s program, New Voices IV: Untitled School (http://www.mondayeveningconcerts.org/january-8-2018-yarn--wire.html), with a renewed sense of wonder at the aural sludge we work with as composers and musicians.

This isn’t to imply that the evening’s entertainment was messy or monochromatic or tracked itself halfway across my apartment before I thought better of it and took off my boots. In fact, the program was exquisitely designed and brilliantly performed—ambitious and hip and carefully paced. New York-based piano and percussion quartet, Yarn/Wire (http://yarnwire.org/), were not just instrumentally virtuosic, but musically virtuosic. Consisting of Laura Bargor and Ying Yi on pianos with Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg on percussion, Yarn/Wire’s dozen years together has yielded a savviness for new music which bathed each work with a sense of proud ownership. In Thomas Meadowcroft (http://www.thomasmeadowcroft.com/)'s Walkman Antiquarian, their playful ensemble work intertwined with nostalgic electronics in child-like exploration, punctuated by moments of breathtaking, reflective stillness. As Paul Griffith (http://www.disgwylfa.com/) puts in his program notes, “Memory is coming to us from several angles and at different removes, in a form that proceeds with the necessity of a ritual.” This reminiscent quality is partially an artifact of the form, but is also illuminated by Meadowcroft’s orchestration. Resonances are disembodied and passed around the ensemble with the saccharine distortions of memory: Vinyl crackles become beads dancing on a speaker cone, melodic episodes reverberate eerily from the harp of the piano. Textures dissolve with a casual inevitability in the way that memories softly, if persistently, return to reality.

The more inward-focused works were Catherine Lamb (http://sacredrealism.org/catlamb/)’s Curvo Totalitas and Johannes Kreidler (http://www.kreidler-net.de/english/index.html/’s Scanner Studies. Where Meadowcroft’s work attended to sound’s referential (and so, emotional) potential, Lamb’s contribution was one of austere magnification of sound itself. Waves of metallic rumbling respiate slowly, almost imperceptibly, gradually unveiling a world of spectral detail and transformations. Yarn/Wire’s performance was patient and deliberate, elegantly unfolding subtle shifts of timbre to stunning, pulsating, effect. Scanner Studies (numbers 1 and 2 were performed) were equally concise in concept: images are sonified in the manner of a simple graphic score before accompanying images. The stage lights were dimmed. There was no formal separation starting or ending either movement. All of this amplified a sense of arrival: Now, we listen rather than watch. Returning to sound(s) from the world rather than the brain, Yarn/Wire summoned a hell-raised, raucous rumbling, only loosening its grip for the flickering, smoky tranquility of “Campfire Songs.”

If anything fell short in the program’s careful design, it was the occasional awkward trappings of traditional concert format: The space, balance and performers were all on-point, but some pieces needed time for digestion afterwards. Jonathan Hepfer (http://www jonathan-hepfer.com/) exuded calm, considerate intelligence and I could imagine him and/or members of the ensemble saying a few words about each piece during stage changes. Certainly program notes can provide helpful context, but with new music the context is unclear at best, and usually still in-development—brief discussions might serve (or supplement) this sort of series well. Still, Paul Griffiths’ program notes were beautiful (“scanning geometries in a thundercloud?” Be still my chart…), and the program held my interest throughout. Needless to say, this will be the first of many Monday Evening Concerts for me; I’ve already marked the remainder of this season’s offerings in my calendar.
Review: A Composer Inspired by Quarks and Chromosomes

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM  MARCH 6, 2017

When a composer announces that her work is inspired by genetics, atomic particles, Möbius strips and the theoretical writings of Roland Barthes, you’d be forgiven for expecting thorny music. Perhaps it makes sense, then, that what was billed as the first substantial concert in America devoted to Misato Mochizuki, a Japanese composer who is based in Paris and draws on a wide and cerebral range of influences, took place at Columbia University.

But Thursday’s program at the Miller Theater, part of the Composer Portraits series, revealed music of sometimes startling sensuality wedded to the kind of structural clarity that can help a first-time listener make sense of things — without the need for voluminous program notes or an advanced degree in biophysics.

Of course, difficulty in music is subjective. But what seemed to make Thursday’s concert accessible was the strong presence of two elements: repetition and ritual.

The concert opened with a visually mesmerizing percussion solo, “Quark — Intermezzi III.” It began with the percussionist Russell Greenberg walking onto the darkened stage swinging a buzzing bow, an instrument consisting of rubber bands stretched over a wooden frame that creates a droning hum when it’s rotated, lasso-like, above the player’s head. Versions of it have been used in sacred rites from ancient Greece to aboriginal Australia, and it is easy to see how its eerie, moaning sound might be used to mediate between the world of physical objects and the spiritual realm.
“Quark” proceeds in brightly colored fragments that establish a given sonic texture before introducing a newcomer sound that, by turns, destabilizes or enriches it. If the strange, ritualistic-seeming gestures performed by Mr. Greenberg helped guide the listener’s eye, the repetition of musical elements helped draw the ear to moments of change that could be experienced as intrusion or diversion — or revelation.

Similar principles guided “Moebius-Ring” for solo piano (with the expressive Ning Yu as soloist); the rhapsodic “Au bleu bois” for solo oboe (the elegant James Austin Smith); and “Terres rouges” for string quartet, performed by the excellent JACK Quartet. In the squeaks, whistles and wilting pitches of “Terres rouges,” a work that makes imaginative use of extended technique, there were also hints of cartoon humor and an affinity for pop music — another of Ms. Mochizuki’s diverse influences.

The evening ended with a dynamic performance of “Le monde des ronds et des carrés” by Yarn/Wire, an ensemble comprising Mr. Greenberg and Ms. Yu, as well as the pianist Laura Barger and the percussionist Ian Antonio. Here, ritual was at the forefront again, with a carefully choreographed opening in which the two percussionists, walking through the auditorium, dispensed resonant bell pings like scent. When the two pianists joined in, they did so first in unison, resulting in a bright and warm sound.

Soon, the sense of community turned adversarial, as the players engaged in rhythmic competition. By the end, all had congregated at a single drum kit at the front of the stage, whacking out hard-driving patterns in a scene that seemed to speak simultaneously of competition and cohesion.

Misato Mochizuki
Performed at the Miller Theater at Columbia University

A version of this review appears in print on March 7, 2017, on Page C2 of the New York edition with the headline: A Composer Inspired by Quarks and Chromosomes.

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MUSIC

Review: Yarn/Wire Plucks and Strikes, Rubs and Strums

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM      MAY 12, 2016

Concerts by the ensemble Yarn/Wire typically come with a ton of baggage. The group is made up of two pianists, Laura Barger and Ning Yu, and two percussionists, Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg, and when they perform, the stage is normally cluttered with instruments.

But on Wednesday at the Miller Theater at Columbia University, Yarn/Wire presented the premiere of “Material” by Michael Gordon, who came up with an uncommonly elegant and visually mesmerizing arrangement: a single piano, played, plucked, strummed and struck by eight hands.

The director and designer Jim Findlay built a special set for the performance, with two tiers of seats encircling a nine-foot Steinway on a stage blocked off from the auditorium by dark curtains. The instrument’s lid had been removed, baring its dignified innards — the gold-toned cast-iron harp with sections of strings fanning out like veins — studded with tiny paper markers. In two corners of the space, metal pipes hung suspended from the ceiling.

“Material” is part of a series of recent works by Mr. Gordon — among them “Timber,” played on six planks of wood called simantras, and “Rushes,” for seven bassoons — that use acoustic instruments in a way that sounds uncannily like electronic music. Here, streams of rapid, percussive notes came together in delicate, complex structures that seemed to float in space. Sometimes one player rubbed a finger along the length of the string while another caused it to vibrate, creating
psychedelic arcs of resonance. In one section, Ms. Yu drew birdlike chirps from the high register of the piano by running a guitar pick over the strings.

Even with the Post-it notes offering guidance, the precision with which Mr. Antonio and Mr. Greenberg drew harmonic patterns from the dense web of strings was dazzling. The variety of colors and textures on offer was also impressive. The piece, which lasts a little more than an hour, consists of blocklike sections that each possess a distinct character and shade.

In a program note, Mr. Gordon explained that he was inspired by the construction noise outside his home in TriBeCa. In “Material,” the insistent repetition and metallic twang of those sounds are transformed into music of mysterious theatricality. The tubular bells, chimed only sparsely, added to the ceremonial feel. As did a passage in which Ms. Yu, wielding a pair of cymbals, solemnly approached certain audience members, extending them close to their ears as if to anoint them with their resonance.

**Correction: May 17, 2016**

A music review on Friday about the ensemble Yarn/Wire, at Miller Theater at Columbia University, misstated the surname of one of the group’s pianists at one point. As the review correctly noted elsewhere, the pianist, Ning Yu, is Ms. Yu, not Ms. Ying. A version of this review appears in print on May 13, 2016, on Page C12 of the New York edition with the headline: Plucking and Striking, Rubbing and Strumming.
Masters of Their Own Reality

by George Grella

Which came first, the string quartet or the String Quartet? There’s semantic and historical interest in the answer. It’s fair to say that the String Quartet, as a compositional genre, began with Haydn. Though he didn’t write the first stand-alone piece for two solo violins, viola, and cello (that appears to have been Haydn’s older Viennese contemporary Georg Christoph Wagenseil), he did institute it as a form and create some of its most enduring works. The practice of the four strings playing together was not new in the 18th century. It was common for string orchestra works to be played with just one musician per part (the separate notational line for the contrabass did not come into widespread practice until the 19th century), and composers in the Baroque era wrote many pieces that can be seen as proto-string quartets: chamber sonatas for the four strings for which the harpsichord was optional.

Haydn himself didn’t set out with the concept of writing string quartet pieces. The composer, a violinist, would often play chamber music at the castle of the Baron Carl Joseph Edler von Fürnberg, in an ensemble with the Baron’s priest and steward, plus a cellist. The Baron asked Haydn to write some new music that the group could play. And so the String Quartet began, like so many other enduring breakthroughs, out of circumstance and accident.

This matters because compositional forms and structures are inextricably intertwined with the instruments and ensembles for which they are written. Baroque counterpoint is to a substantial extent an exploration of tuning and keyboard technology, symphonies take advantage of the number of instruments in the orchestra, and the new virtuosity and complexity of 20th-century music is a story of the discovery of new instrumental techniques.

And that’s why the ensemble Yarn/Wire matters. It is one of a number of accomplished new music groups on the contemporary scene, and it’s made up of the unique instrumentation of two pianists (Laura Barger and Ning Yu) and two percussionists (Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg). Before Yarn/Wire, there were three notable compositions for this grouping: Bartók’s Sonata for 2 Pianos and Percussion, Berio’s Linea, and Crumb’s Music for a Summer Evening (Makrokosmos III). After nine years (the ensemble is
celebrating its tenth anniversary this 2015 – 16 season), its repertoire list approached seventy pieces, almost sixty of which were written in the 21st century, with thirty-nine (as of this writing) either commissioned by or composed expressly for Yarn/Wire. By existing and playing, Yarn/Wire is creating the two pianos/percussion genre in classical music.

This all started—as Greenberg told me in an interview at the ensemble’s rehearsal studio—at Stony Brook University, where Barger, Antonio, and Greenberg were in graduate school. Along with pianist Daniel Schlosberg (Yu joined in 2011), they began playing the Bartók, Berio, and Crumb pieces, while also exploring Steve Reich’s works for differing instrumentation. Playing led to further interest, then to public performances; praxis led to breakthroughs, and at some point an ensemble (and a genre) was born.

Since there was so little music actually available, the members went about looking for composers who would like to write for them. Part of that process was educating composers as to just what they could do with the unusual instrumentation. Composers learn some orchestration as a matter of course, but it takes specific study with musicians to not only learn the subtle specifics of what each instrument can do, but the most effective way to notate those instructions. The array of percussion instruments that surrounds the musicians in their studio is a testament to just how many details there are to cover. Yu spoke of how the group spent time with younger composers, showing them the possibilities, and even mentioned working on a piece with an experienced composer who came into the studio and with almost every instrument at hand wanted to hear, “How does that sound when you hit it like this?”

At ten years, this collaborative process is in full flower. The bloom burst with the group’s residency at ISSUE Project Room, in 2012. Those not fortunate enough to catch that series of performances of new and commissioned work can catch up with Yarn/Wire’s three volumes of *Currents* recordings, which captured music performed in those concerts (yarnwire.bandcamp.com/music).

The recordings are a mix of the live ISSUE events and studio recordings, but all of them come together as both a tidy and impressive survey of contemporary music and also as an ongoing practice and process: substantial windows into the the new musical possibilities that Yarn/Wire is both promoting and pioneering.

The three volumes are uniformly fascinating and exciting, with playing that is precise and full of purpose. They make for one of the outstanding new music releases of the past few years, and show Yarn/Wire at its best.

They also show why Yarn/Wire matters. Considered as a percussion ensemble—and the piano is fairly seen as a percussion instrument—and viewing the landscape of contemporary music, there are numerous percussion ensembles—Sō Percussion, Mantra Percussion, Iktus, Red Fish Blue Fish—playing what is now the enormous repertoire of 20th-and 21st-century percussion music: Xenakis, Cage, Reich, and more. Loud and quiet, striking objects in time, producing complex timbres, laying out repetitive processes, these are commonplace features (welcomely so) of the contemporary music scene.

Reich’s Marimba Phase is on the Yarn/Wire repertoire list, but it really doesn’t indicate what the ensemble plays or where it’s going. The three *Currents* volumes have the playful, digital age impressionism of
Thomas Meadowcroft’s *Walkman Antiquarian*; Christopher Trapani’s tense, mysterious, microtonal *Writing Against Time*; Ann Cleare’s gnashing *I should live in wires for leaving you behind*; the Carl Stalling-like electronic transformations in Sam Pluta’s *Seven Systems*; and Mark Fell’s pulsating *core, self, oscillation*, not avant-garde dance music but dance music for the avant-garde.

This music, together with a new piece, *Mind is Moving* . . ., by Chiyoko Szlavics, which the group played at National Sawdust in December, and the world premieres of Alex Mincek’s *Images of Duration (In homage to Ellsworth Kelly)* and *Torrent* (with the Mivos Quartet), which it played at Mincek’s February Composer Portrait concert at Miller Theatre, stands alone as a new body of work in the classical tradition. Working with Yarn/Wire, composers have clearly taken advantage of the musicians’ skills and the possibilities of combining the complex timbres of percussion instruments with the harmonies and sustained notes (not to mention extended techniques) of the piano. Particularly exciting is that Michael Gordon is preparing an evening-length work for them, *Material*. Yarn/Wire will play the world premiere at Miller on May 11, for Gordon’s Composer Portrait.

While all of this music is in an array of styles, it is remarkable how much of the music uses silence and wide, empty spaces. The fundamental action in the group’s playing is that someone is striking something—maybe a drum head with a stick, or a piano key with a finger (and in turn a hammer a string). The fundamental result of that action is attack and decay, exactly like the use of percussion instruments in the common practice period of classical music. Yarn/Wire can play pulse-grid minimalism as well as any other contemporary group, and they have, but the music they are helping create is in this curious way more classical, more traditional. Yarn/Wire has somehow stripped away decades of accepted practice for how percussion music is supposed to go—repetitive and beat heavy—and, by starting with the basics, opened up an entirely new path for composers.

This seems to implicitly suit them, as if they are exercising unspoken values every time they work with a composer. Talking about the long tradition of classical music, Antonio said he would like to someday arrange Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* for the group, while Barger added that she would love to do *The Nutcracker*. It’s the next best thing to asking Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky for some new music.

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**CONTRIBUTOR**

George Grella

GEORGE GRELLA is the *Rail’s* music editor.

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**RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**

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**Shostakovich Slips the Noose:**

*Quatuor Debussy and Circa*

by Jeff Tompkins
Review: Yarn/Wire Mesmerizes at Lincoln Center Festival

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM  JULY 16, 2015

Over the course of music history composers have emphasized different aspects of music: melody, for instance, or harmony or timbre. On Wednesday evening, the Lincoln Center Festival offered a mesmerizing concert of new music that explored resonance as a central expressive device. The concert, at the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse, featured Yarn/Wire, an ensemble made up of two percussionists and two pianists. They presented three world premieres by Tristan Murail, Misato Mochizuki and Raphaël Cendo, who all found different ways to luxuriate in the sound-clouds this combination of instruments can produce.

Mr. Murail’s “Travel Notes” sounded like gently psychedelic Messiaen, Ms. Mochizuki’s “Le monde des ronds et des carrés” investigated the benign and oppressive aspects of rituals, and Mr. Cendo’s “Direct Action” assaulted the listener with a riotous excess of activity.

But what the works had in common was an obsession with the behavior of sound after a given note has been produced. In these richly textured pieces, the beauty lay in observing the resonance trails of notes, which might taper off smoothly or oscillate nervously, coo contentedly or expire with a soft moan.

Some of these phenomena were the product of a given percussion
instrument being struck — or rubbed or bowed — in a certain way. In “Direct Action,” a sweep of a soft mallet over a suspended metal sheet produced a heaving groan; a bow pulled along the bars of what looked like an open-topped bird cage could sound uncannily choral. Ms. Mochizuki added a spatial dimension when she had the two percussionists, Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg, move through the room rubbing the rims of prayer bowls so that the resulting golden hum trailed through space like incense.

The two grand pianos, freed of their covers, did much to shelter and extend these sounds merely by their presence. With their metal frames and responsive metal strings, the pianos acted like acoustic caldrons in which a clangorous chord, such as one produced by all four players in “Travel Notes,” could brew intoxicating overtones.

But the two pianists, Laura Barger and Ning Yu, were far from passive participants. In “Travel Notes,” Mr. Murail gave them luscious, Lisztian passages. In one central section of “Le monde des ronds et des carrés,” where the initial meditative mood gives way to restrictive patterns, they played repeated scales that seemed to inchworm their way up the keyboards in what, by a trick of the ear, seemed like a continuous, futile ascent. The resonant bandwidth of the music also pulled back here to a more oily and dense sound.

Ms. Mochizuki’s work ended with all four musicians rapping out a fast-driving and complex pattern on a drum kit stationed at the front of the stage – the only time in this percussion-heavy recital that rhythm was king.

**Correction: July 18, 2015**

A music review on Friday about a Lincoln Center Festival concert of new music, at the Stanley H. Kaplan playhouse, misidentified the piece that ended with all four musicians playing on a drum kit. It was Misato Mochizuki’s “Le monde des ronds et des carrés,” not Raphaël Cendo’s “Direct Action.”

The Lincoln Center Festival continues through Aug. 2; lincolncenterfestival.org

A version of this review appears in print on July 17, 2015, on page C3 of the New York edition
MUSIC

Review: Yarn/Wire Provides Two Flavors of Thrill

By ZACHARY WOOLFE  SEPT. 30, 2015

Yarn/Wire’s concert on Tuesday ended without Yarn/Wire. It speaks to this unusual, insightful ensemble’s self-effacing focus on composers and their music that after playing Mark Fell’s “core, self, oscillation,” the four members — two pianists and two percussionists, celebrating the start of their 10th season together — left the stage and listened along with the audience to an electronic version of the same piece.

While rigorous in conception, the austere yet sensual “core, self, oscillation” nevertheless surprised. At the start, somber piano chords, distantly spaced, underlay an uncertain rhythm played on shallow frame drums.

In the basement of Artists Space Books & Talks in TriBeCa — a regular host for presentations by Issue Project Room, a frequent Yarn/Wire collaborator, while its home in Downtown Brooklyn is renovated — each tap of fingers on the skin of the drum registered with tactile immediacy. Both chords and drum beats brightened, and then harsh mallet strikes on one percussionist’s drum found a softer, gentler echo on the other’s.

Vigorously attacking a piece of pipe, the percussionists occasionally held it so that loud clanging muted to duller clunks. Gongs laid flat on tables in the
final section were vibrated to a subdued shimmer. In the electronic version, the chords were an ambient whisper; the percussion was milder and less ritualistic. Live, the work felt more ambiguous and less structured: The performances provided two different flavors of thrill.

Sam Pluta’s “Seven” involved a similar alternation of subdued and violent moments. A quiet, glistening bell-like beginning quickly fell down a rabbit hole of crashing, jerky activity, marked by nature sounds played over loudspeakers and the weird, wheezy tone of two robotically stimulated snare drums placed among the audience.

An increasingly insistent percussion duet was paired with an increasingly cataclysmic piano one, and then long runs of 16th notes in the pianos formed a flowing fabric for the jittery embroidery of uneven percussion rhythms. Much of the music was anxious, but the writing had cool confidence.

The first piece on the program, David Bird’s “Mediums,” was the least interesting, pairing serene footage of New York City with a muddled mixture of ambient street noises and more mystical acoustic playing from the quartet. But the pianists Laura Barger and Ning Yu and the percussionists Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg brought to all three works their characteristic combination of precision and freedom.

A version of this review appears in print on October 1, 2015, on page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: An Ensemble That’s Focused on Composers Offers Two Flavors of Thrill.