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Music

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, Taube Atrium Theater, San Francisco — 'Provocative'

An unforgettable Icelandic journey was among the works performed at this season-opening concert



Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir © Saga Sigurdardottir

7 HOURS AGO by: **Allan Ulrich**

The peripatetic new music ensemble launched its 46th season last weekend in a former home, the Taube Atrium Theater, the rotunda that once housed the sculpture gallery of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It was here that such musical giants as John Cage and Morton Feldman once dispensed their own inimitable charisma, a heritage that proved a happy influence on current director, Steven Schick. The programming was provocative, the performances mostly persuasive.

Over the decades, the organisation has introduced this community to several significant artists. The Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir falls triumphantly into that category,

thanks to her translucent 40-minute essay *In the Light of Air* (2013). The scoring (piano, harp, violin, cello, percussion) and the electronic modification yield arresting sonorities that have been compared to experiencing the northern lights from the inside out (a fair light show accompanied the performance). The composer explores unconventional techniques. The pianist strikes the strings with mallets, the string players bow eccentrically, and there are brief harmonic convergences that leave you breathless. The work begins with an imperceptible rumble, it subsides to a mild roar, and it all seems to shimmer. Thorvaldsdottir has escorted us through an unforgettable journey.

The concert's world premiere, Joe Pereira's *Glimpse*, offered less satisfaction, despite Schick's careful direction. As the title suggests, this is a work comprised of fragments, which occasionally suggests Webern on steroids; the five players tantalise us with bits, riffs fashioned in a post-tonal idiom (the alto flute and bass clarinet contribution are especially alluring), but *Glimpse* keeps its secrets to the end.

A wave of good humor washes over Ken Ueno's *Sawdust on Ararat*, also new this year. In some ways, this is a quasi-clarinet concerto (Claire Brazeau was the superb guest soloist), with strings and percussion contributing witty flourishes. The title refers to the plank-sawing duet that concludes the work.

Two of the group's finest veteran players, guitarist David Tanenbaum and alto flute Tod Brody, delivered an eloquent reading of Toru Takemitsu's elegiac *Toward the Sea*, in this context something of a classic.



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