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San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, SF Conservatory of Music — 'Arresting, tantalising'

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Steve Schick. Photo: Bill Dean

For a venerable, 45-year-old institution, the Players are looking disconcertingly youthful these days. Credit artistic director and percussionist Steve Schick, whose five-year reign has rejuvenated the area's longest-running new music group. Forging a relationship with advanced student performers has generated an enthusiasm that seemed to be waning before the arrival of Schick.

He has also spurred interest by reviving nearly new and deserving music and imposing a unifying theme on a season. The most recent concert, *Xeriscape*, ("a dry space"), dealt with the manner in which composers alter the spatial parameters of our environment. Whether the music of Zosha Di Castri, Louis Andriessen and Morton Feldman brings us to an understanding of the current

California drought (as Schick hopes) is a matter of conjecture.

But the wildly contrasting styles of Andriessen's amazing *Workers Union* (1975) and Feldman's *For Samuel Beckett* (1987) created a potent juxtaposition. Oddly, both Andriessen's ear-shattering minimalist essay and Feldman's delicately shifting timbres fundamentally featured the same instrumental complement (23 players) and each creates its own, arresting sonic universe.

In his 17-minute piece, the Dutch composer notates his rhythms, but leaves the pitches, repetitions and durations to the players; he asks for a loud volume, which is what he got in this compelling, industrial-strength performance led by Schick on vibraphone. A successful reading depends on both freedom and discipline. As a metaphor for political action and artistic harmony, the work could not be bettered.

In his final large-scale piece, Feldman honoured the passing of playwright and erstwhile collaborator Beckett with an elegiac, 55-minute opus in which incremental changes are minute, as they generate ethereal harmonies projected at a modest dynamic. The piano most acutely signals the progress of the work. Over time, one senses an approximation of human breathing.

The brief programme opener, the local premiere of Di Castri's *La forma dello spazio*, dispatched its five players around the hall. Piano and violin delivered the principal material. From the back of the room, flute and clarinet registered as almost subliminal presences. A tantalising essay.



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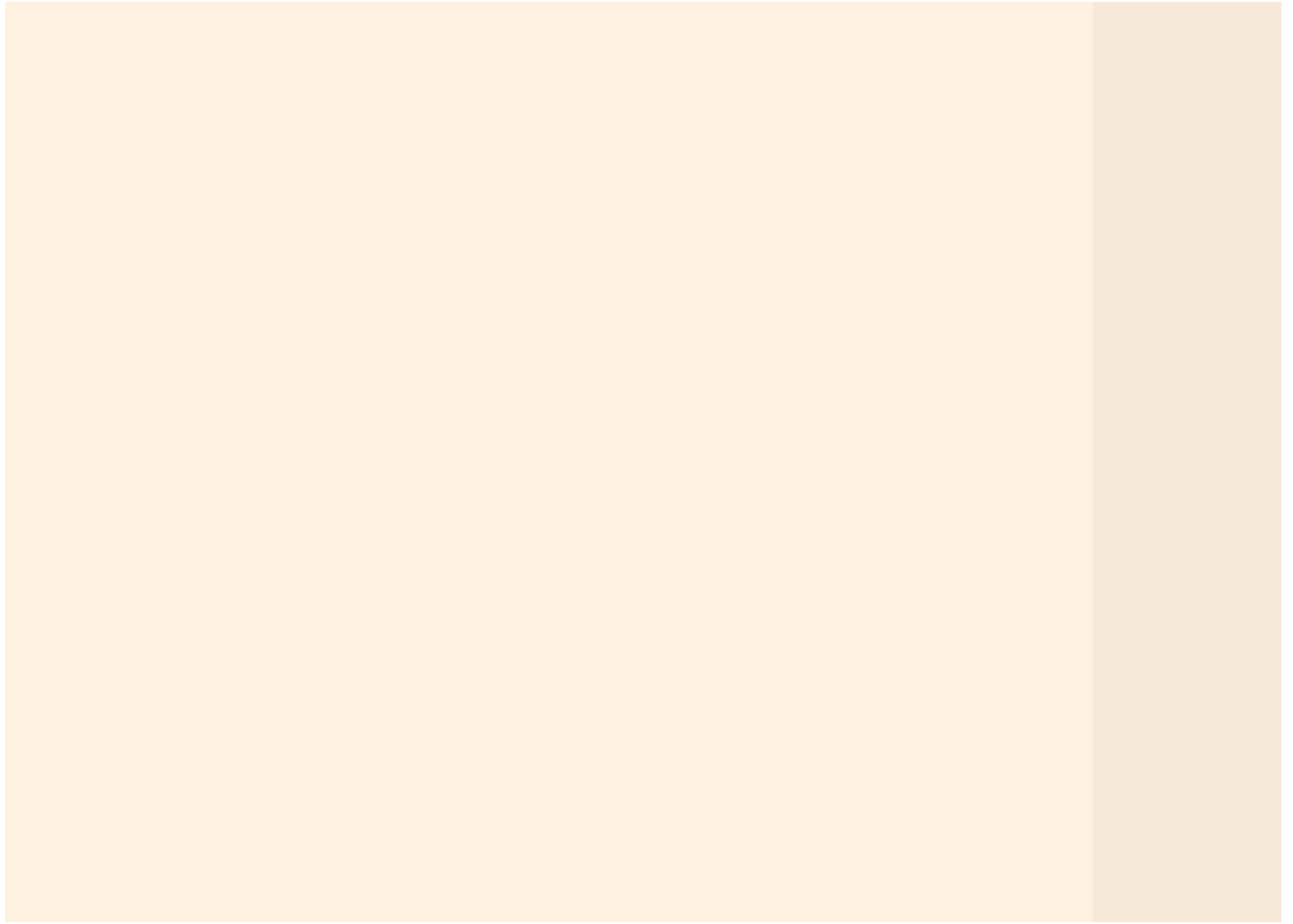
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