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Music Review | Washington Square Ensemble
Waves Rippling and Shimmering in a Sea of Sound



Spring Splendor Stephen Gosling performing with the Washington Square Ensemble at Merkin Concert Hall on Wednesday night.

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While composing his three-movement Chamber Symphony, Louis Karchin was preoccupied with exploring the range of sonorities possible with a small ensemble that included a piano and most orchestral instruments.

His efforts paid off with a kaleidoscopic work that received its world premiere on Wednesday at Merkin Concert Hall, with Mr. Karchin conducting the Washington Square Ensemble. The Washington Square Contemporary Music Society presented the program, "Spring Splendor."

Rippling waves of sound punctuated the first movement of the symphony, rich with intriguing timbres. The textures thinned for the sparer slow movement, followed by a riotous explosion of color in the exuberant finale.

Robert Sirota's "Assimilations," a quartet for piano, violin, cello and clarinet that also received its world premiere here, was the most personal work in the lineup. According to the program notes the title refers to Mr. Sirota's status as a Christian convert with a strong awareness of his Jewish heritage and a

“distinctly Jewish sense of urgency — of preparedness.”

“Psychologically,” Mr. Sirota writes, “my bags are always packed,” a duality that mocks his “so-called assimilation.”

That urgency surfaced in an intense violin solo that unfolded in a high range. Jaunty, klezmer-tinged segments were interwoven with slow, melancholy passages. The quartet faded to a whisper with a questioning motif.

Richard Festinger’s Concerto for Piano and Nine Instruments, which received its New York premiere, was less successful. The work began with a spare adagio introduction on the piano, which became a dialogue with the ensemble. The mood and tempo picked up, with vibrant sections interwoven with elegiac piano solos. There were ear-catching moments, but the piece felt long and outstayed its welcome. The pianist Stephen Gosling played his part with panache.

Mr. Gosling also performed the program’s opening piece, the New York premiere of Fabio Grasso’s “Blumentraum.” The title is a homage to “Blumenstücke” by the German writer Jean Paul, which inspired Schumann’s work of the same name.

Mr. Grasso quotes the theme of Schumann’s score in this effective work, whose gauzy, impressionistic colors are meant to evoke (according to the notes) a “peaceful spring scene in the tender morning light.”

Laurie San Martin’s energetic Two Pieces for Piano and Percussion, which came next, dramatically changed the mood. The work, performed by the pianist Blair McMillen and the percussionist Matthew Gold, has two parts, “Fragments” and “Bone Dance.”

“Fragments” consists of brief phrases played on piano and percussion; the rhythmically driven “Bone Dance” featured exuberant passages on xylophone.