

Intimate setting suits performance of works by Swedish composer Anders Hillborg

Stephen Brookes March 10, 2017



The Swedes, it seems, contribute more than their fair share of sanity to the

global psyche. And Thursday night's smorgasbord of chamber music by Anders Hillborg — part of the Phillips Collection's "Leading International Composers" series — seemed to reflect the country. That is, it was both intellectually engaging and warmly approachable, marked by a kind of playful, inclusive modernism that drew on everything from Renaissance music to the driving pulse of rock.

Less bleeding-edge individualism, in other words, than an embrace of musical community — even down to the Phillips's seating arrangement, which exchanged the usual strict rows for an intimate semicircle around the performers. And although the first work was a rather stately "Opening Fanfare" (written for the Swedish Parliament, hence the stately) played by the Axiom Brass ensemble, the sense of open-minded curiosity that runs through Hillborg's music quickly emerged.

His 1998 "Brass Quintet," for instance, contrasted passages of lazily smeared notes with others of punchy, hard-driving power, while two fine works for string quartet drew intriguingly from composers from Stravinsky to Bach. In the "Kongsgaard Variations" (built around the gorgeous "Arietta" theme from Beethoven's last piano sonata, Op. 111), Hillborg channeled Beethoven's dramatic lyricism in a free-flowing meta style that slipped effortlessly from Renaissance dances to the ultramodern coda that closed the work. The Calder Quartet turned in an expressive and deeply felt performance, as they did with the seven dark, meditative movements of Hillborg's 2007 "Heisenberg Miniatures."

The "Kongsgaard Variations" was the most revealing and impressive work of the evening. But there were other delights as well. Clarinetist Moran Katz turned in high-powered performances of several short works, from the spare staccato lines of "Tampere Raw" to the darting, birdlike gestures of "The Peacock Moment." Her reading (with violinist Andrew Bulbrook) of "Primal

Blues” was pure fun, as was “Close Up,” with taped tablas providing accompaniment.

But it may have been pianist Amy Yang who stole the show. After joining Katz in “Tampere Raw,” she delivered a jaw-dropping reading of “Corrente della Primavera.” A pianistic tour de force from 2002, the work’s scintillating, white-hot cascades of sound demand both power and exceptional lightness of touch, and Yang brought it off with effortless finesse; a memorable performance of a remarkable work.

CORRECTION: *An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the pianist.*