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Chris Rogerson, composer

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New Portraits of Grief and Wanderlust

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

Chamber music concerts focusing on contemporary works often attract small audiences. But the organizers of the Tribeca New Music Festival needed to find a larger space this year after events sold out during the last two seasons at the Flea Theater downtown. The four-event festival began on Saturday evening at Merkin Concert Hall with an engaging concert by the stellar Jack Quartet, whose young members are vigorous and committed purveyors of new fare. Preston Stahly, the artistic director of the New York Art Ensemble, which presents the festival, hosted the event, during which each composer spoke briefly about his or her work.

The success of the festival, which was founded in 2001, no doubt stems both from high-quality performances and from its eclectic, anti-elitist “avant pop” programming ethos. The New York Art

Ensemble’s Web site (nyae.org) says: “Old academic habits die hard, and many students today are still getting caught in the old ‘my way or the highway’ mind-set. Much of academia still lives in denial.”

There was nothing academic about the visceral program on Saturday, which opened with Jeff Myers’s striking “Dopamine,” a harmonically rich work written during what Mr. Myers called 10 days of “ravenous composing.” Insistent cello motifs underpinned melodies in the upper strings, punctuated by energetic outbursts and elegiac passages.

Chris Rogerson won the New York Art Ensemble’s 2010 competition for composers 21 and younger for his well-made String Quartet No. 1, here in its New York premiere. There were echoes of Bartok in the slashing figures of “Duel,” the vigorous first movement. Passages of haunting beauty in “Hymn,” the solemn second movement, gave way to “Dance,” the lively finale.



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Lisa Bielawa based “The Trojan Women,” an expressive quartet, on a score she wrote for a production of Euripides’ tragedy of the same name. JoAnne Akalaitis, the director, asked Ms. Bielawa to compose music that reflected different types of grief. So “Hecuba,” the first movement, unfolds with stately sorrow. “Cassandra,” the second, dissolves into anguished intensity, and “Andromache,” the finale, delves into introspective pathos. The concert ended with David Crowell’s cinematographic and Minimalist “Open Road,” an inspired work that evoked Mr. Crowell’s frequent road trips out West.

The Jack Quartet performed with dedication and understanding throughout the evening.