



MUSIC REVIEW

Surprises in a Setting That Could Wither

By ALLAN KOZINN
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The Museum of Modern Art opened its free Summergarden series in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden on Sunday evening, and the atmosphere was very much what it was when the series left off last year. Joel Sachs and the superb young musicians of the New Juilliard Ensemble were on the stage, fresh new works were on the music stands, the birds were making a ruckus in the sculpture garden's trees (at least during the first half) and the garden was packed with listeners sipping drinks and taking in the performance.

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Ari Mintz for The New York Times

Joel Sachs conducting the New Juilliard Ensemble in the Summergarden series at the Museum of Modern Art.

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This is the 40th year that the museum has presented Summergarden, but it is hard not to wonder whether it will be around for its 50th anniversary. It has shrunk woefully in recent years, from two performances a week throughout July and August, all played by students from the Juilliard School, to four single concerts, with Juilliard and Jazz at Lincoln Center presenting two apiece. Mr. Sachs said, both privately and in his introductory comments from the stage, that the museum was eager to continue the series; its withering has been entirely a matter of economics.

For now Mr. Sachs and company must make the most of the resources at hand, and as it happened, the opening program was devoted to works fresh enough to make the evening seem celebratory. The opener, Keeril Makan's "After Forgetting" (2009), portrays the vicissitudes of memory — trying to capture that elusive thought or word that is on the tip of your tongue — by way of an insistently tolling piano and percussion figure built of slowly shifting harmonies. Other instruments create contrapuntal layers that reach the verge of a resolution before morphing into something else.

You might think that Mr. Makan's compositional strategies would yield an experience as frustrating as the memory problem that the work describes, but instead you find yourself amused and impressed by his ingenuity and the surprises he presents within the repetitive structures he builds.

On the surface there is little common ground between Mr. Makan's work and Marta Ptaszynska's "Trois Visions de l'Arc-en-Ciel" (1988), but their vivid use of shifting timbres has much in common. Ms. Ptaszynska, a student of Messiaen, pays tribute to her teacher in this work by drawing on the otherworldly use of color and gesture —

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combinations of clarinet, vibraphone and piano, for example.

But where Messiaen put his techniques at the service of describing the notions of celestial bliss (and, at times, terror) that he found in Roman Catholic mysticism, Ms. Ptaszynska offers an equally prismatic but less specific view with the image of the rainbow as a bridge between man and God. And though the first of the work's three movements is rich in Messiaenisms, the remaining ones drift toward other influences. A descending string figure in the central "Les armes d'Iris" suggests laughter, as it used to be evoked in scores for silent films, and in her finale, "La Gloire de l'Arc-en-Ciel," she begins with Minimalist repetition and ends with a klezmer-accented theme.

Richard Causton's "Phoenix" (2006) also used color, as well as idiosyncratic techniques (slow-motion trills and tremolando, for example), to paint a vivid picture, in this case the fiery death and resurrection of the mythical bird of his title. And Mr. Sachs closed the program with [Conrad Cummings's](#) "I Wish They All Could Be ..." (1986, revised 2002), an inventive look back at his student years, when he was obsessed not only with contemporary classical music but with the Beach Boys as well. The score quotes — sometimes straight, sometimes in distorted forms — riffs, melody fragments and harmonies from "California Girls," "I Get Around" and the hymnlike "In My Room" within a dense but playful harmonic frame.

Summergarden runs through July 31 (the final New Juilliard Ensemble concert is on July 24) at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 708-9400; [moma.org](#).

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