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The Nasher's Soundings Series Premieres a Major New Work

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By Wayne Lee Gay



The Soundings chamber music series, now in its sixth season of presenting not just new music but new ways of hearing music, continued its mission Saturday night with a concert featuring the world premiere of what will undoubtedly be a major addition to the concert repertoire of the harp.

Concerts of the series, which are curated by pianist Seth Knopp, are usually presented at the Nasher Sculpture Center; Saturday night's event was scheduled to take place down the street at Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing Arts. A power outage at the school forced the event to move across the street to Hamon Hall, the small auditorium of the Winspear Opera House. A production of another brand new work, Mark Adamo's opera *Becoming Santa Claus* was taking place in the main auditorium of that same building, literally on the other side of the wall—with noise from that performance occasionally leaking through.

Once the audience and performers had taken the short walk across the street, the evening's intriguingly layered presentation of music opened with "Flow My Tears" for solo viola, an eight-minute work by Houston-born Christopher Theofanidis, who currently serves on the faculty at Yale. An almost Schumannesque, endless melody travels from calm sorrow through the rage of grief, beautifully exploiting the oft-overlooked range of colors and timbres of the viola, here performed by Jonathan Vinocour.

The engagingly dark mood of the concert continued with contemporary German composer Jörg Widmann's *Ikarische Klage* ("The Complaints of an Icarus"). This thirteen-minute work for an ensemble of ten strings, inspired by a poem of Charles Baudelaire, builds an intense emotional effect—akin to but not exactly the same as Glass-style minimalism—around a series of intense drones. Members of the East Coast Chamber Orchestra, a conductor-less chamber orchestra based in New York, navigated the work's special effects and unique sounds vigorously. The first half of the program closed with another magnificently sorrowful work, J.S. Bach's Chaconne in D minor for solo violin, here performed by five violinists from the orchestra stationed around the room for a wonderful stereophonic effect, as well as a new perspective on this well-known work.

After intermission, the interplay of past and present continued with the addition of harp to the mix, as Israeli harpist Sivan Magen joined cellist Efe Batacigil for the "Choral" of contemporary French composer Philippe Hersant, a resonant work based on a medieval chant, transformed in the tradition of Messiaen. More Bach in the form of the chorale *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* arranged for strings provided a perfect transition to the main and final work of the evening, Theofanidis' *A Thousand Cranes* for harp and strings.

This structurally ambitious work, inspired by the true story of a Japanese victim of the bombing of Hiroshima who sought consolation and healing in the construction of a thousand origami cranes, opens with an intriguingly spare three-note motif which soon blossoms into a complex and beautifully rich web of skillfully wrought ideas, spread over thirty minutes and three movements. Besides providing a consolatory aura to close the evening's dark journey, *A Thousand Cranes*, here presented in its first performance ever, is a work that deserves and should win a place in the repertoire of chamber orchestras; conceived for small ensemble of fifteen strings and harp, its strikingly rich sounds and profound ideas would be a welcome addition to the concerts of major orchestras as well.