

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, mostly sunny, unseasonably warm, high 78. Tonight, increasing clouds, mild, low 64. Tomorrow, limited sun, mild, showers arriving, high 75. Weather map, Page D10.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIN BASANO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The American Composers Orchestra with Ken Thomson's quartet, Gutbucket.

Hybrid Doesn't Always Mean Synthesis

Since its inaugural concert in 1977 the American Composers Orchestra has played an invaluable role in fostering the creation and promotion of contemporary American music. Recent seasons have suggested a quiet tug of war among the elements of its name. Some initiatives, for example, questioned the meaning of "American" by emphasizing music from Latin America or music by immigrant composers of disparate origin.

The greatest source of flux in the group's profile lately has been a decreased emphasis on "Orchestra." Last season only one event featured a full symphonic complement; this season none do. Meanwhile "Composers" has gained prominence through an initiative focusing on

A focus on artists who both write and perform.

artists who both write and perform. Of the six works the ensemble played at Zankel Hall on Friday night, four were premieres in which the composers participated.

Audacity is admirable. But execution also counts, and in this the ensemble, conducted by Steven Sloane, fell short, right down to the awkward set changes and handling of multimedia components.

Scott Johnson, whose "Stalking



Anna Clyne and cello, during a performance of "paintbox."

Horse" opened the concert, is known for a small body of fascinating, precision-tooled works. Those qualities were missing here. The balance between Mr. Johnson's animated electric-guitar playing and the amplified orchestra was patchy; brass and wind entries were tentative, sapping momentum.

The urge to approve of a worthy composer's exposure is considerable. But the danger in a performance like this cannot be overstated. To the public an inept premiere is more likely to reflect badly on its composer than on performers acting under an authoritative name.

The playing was better in Susie Ibarra's "Pintados Dream," a simple, delicately scored modal reverie that provided a showcase for Ms. Ibarra's sensitive, poetic drumming and watercolor daubs by the painter Makoto Fujimura. But a murky account of Steve Coleman's "Illusion of Body" misrepresented its composer, a jazz saxophonist whose albums

American Composers Orchestra Zankel Hall

present a gripping alchemy of complex rhythms and globe-spanning mythologies. Mr. Coleman's cosmos-pondering concept was reduced to primordial ooze, rendering analysis pointless.

Anna Clyne's "paintbox" dispensed with the orchestra altogether. Ms. Clyne sat motionless, cross-legged with her cello in her lap, while Joshue Ott, a computer artist, illustrated her dense, playful electronic mash-up of sustained cello tones, plinking music-box sounds, stuttering speech and layered vocals. "Revelations," a 1955 work by the restlessly inquisitive jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus, positioned him as a spiritual forebear.

The concert ended on a high note, literally, with the frenetic saxophonist Ken Thomson's "Wait Your Turn," an animated battle between the orchestra and Mr. Thomson's punk-jazz quartet, Gutbucket. The groups took turns playing frenetic chords and explosive rhythms; when they came together, the music offered a density worthy of the closing bars of a Led Zeppelin epic.

However the American Composers Orchestra decides to address the troublesome issues raised by this concert, it should do so quickly. One obvious solution would be to offer fewer premieres and rehearse each more thoroughly. What was presented here served the best interests of no one, least of all the composers whose works were so poorly represented.

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Wait Your Turn
October 2007
Zankel Hall @ Carnegie Hall
Annenberg Center @ University of Pennsylvania

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Review *Music*

Like exegesis with that?

2 new-music concerts show perils of over-explaining.

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

The key to keeping mainstream audiences from fleeing new and edgy classical music lies, it would seem, in feeding listeners more and more information. That, at least, seemed to be the game plan in Morton

Feldman's famously meditative 1971 masterwork *Rothko Chapel* by the Philadelphia Singers on Saturday, and, to a lesser degree, at Sunday's opening concert of the New York-based American Composers Orchestra's residency at the Annenberg Center.

See **CONCERTS** on E5

Thomson's *Wait Your Turn* is as visceral as music can be: While some composers struggle to give an orchestra rhythmic life, Thomson gave the orchestra jazzlike riffs. He also knows how to create tension with escalating chromatic lines, or to give himself and his punk/jazz group, named gutbucket, a forum for its own showcase moments.

artsJournal

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Greg Sandow

... in an article about collaborations with orchestra including Sufjan Stevens, Ben Folds, Nick Cave:

And then there was a piece by Ken Thomson, *Wait Your Turn*, a fabulous romp for Thomson's band gutbucket (again no capital letter) and orchestra, which I heard and loved at an American Composers Orchestra concert in New York not long ago. gutbucket plays a wild mixture of punk, jazz, and -- to my ear, and I really loved this -- metal. The orchestra part doesn't sound difficult; here's a piece that any orchestra could program, and have lots of fun with the new young audience Thomson might attract, or at least delight.

www.classicalsource.com

[*Wait Your Turn*] came off as an exuberant and entertaining pie in the face of traditional sonata form. The work begins with the strings sawing away on sixteenth notes in octave unison, percussive punctuation on (or off) the measure, woodwinds (in the high range) and brass blaring dissonant but tonal-centric chords, seeming to build to a climax and then ... continuing. Eventually, the orchestra hits a dynamic climax and Gutbucket enters - playing exactly the same music with which the orchestra began, but arranged for saxophone, electric guitar and bass, and drum kit, an unrelenting wall of rhythmically tight, machine-gun jazz-punk noise. Gutbucket demonstrated their well-earned reputation for high-energy avant-rock fusion - especially Thomson, who is a particularly extroverted player. Conductor Steven Sloane and the orchestra mirrored his amped-up euphoria as they joined in the work's final barrage of aural mayhem, trading blasts of virtuosic energy, a heavy-metal post-Bernsteinian musical rumble that received a rousing ovation and brought an adventurous evening of music to a riveting close.