We had an interesting two nights of new music this  
weekend, coming at the end of the school year.  These were  
only two of several events in a weekend-long new-music  
marathon.  On Friday night was the recital for students of  
NAU composition professor Bruce Reiprich.  As is typical  
for such recitals, the pieces ranged from brilliant to banal.  
Young folks borrow a lot from contemporary sounds, naturally,

so there were processed recordings,  
distorted percussion, and so on.  Lots of MIDI touchpads, laptops,  
and cabling all over the place; everything getting videoed  
(webcast?) by multiple cameras and cell-phones on tripods.  
There were also two string quartets (the younger of which had  
serious intonation problems), and a straightforward piece  
scored for a fair-sized chamber orchestra.  Welcome to  
contemporary "classical music"!  
     Saturday night's concert was a bit more unhinged,  
and presented six new works commissioned and curated by  
Liza Stegall, the saxophonist of Erasable Color.  (All of  
this was separate from credited academic course-work,  
by the way.)  Liza and Owen again had strung laptops, mikes,  
signal processors all over the front of the house (1200-seat  
Ardrey auditorium, with about 100 of us modern-music fans  
sparsely distributed in the audience).  I sat with Liza on  
Friday evening (the same hundred of us), and she told me  
just getting all the different arrangements of hardware on  
stage sketched out was a big job.  Things were complicated enough  
that there were significant intermissions between each of the  
six pieces performed, a little absurdist theatre as the  
stage-hands and musicians shoved the 9-foot Steinway from center  
to the side, chairs and music-stands came and went, the 'kaoss'  
processor-pad hooked up, and so on.  All this was perhaps mainly  
a consequence that no two works were alike in any way.  
     As the flyer for the event announced, there was contemporary  
dance, spliced Beyonce', amplified typewriter, body percussion,  
and other features.  The highlights included a long piece  
written by Owen for sax and vibes (Liza and Owen) with two dancers.  
As someone unfamiliar with dance, the choreography seemed  
very complex and expressive to me; also physically calisthenic  
for 7000 feet:  the two ladies couldn't hide the fact that they  
were huffing and puffing as they took their bows at the end.  
Owen said the dancers worked directly with him as he composed ---  
he sketched a line of music, and they made up the dance moves  
on the spot for each little bit.  Somehow it all got written out  
and rehearsed, since there was a strong narrative thread involved.  
     Piano student Simon Nissen fiddled with Beyonce' songs  
to create sampled strings of lyrics she never actually sang  
together, and used the resulting melodic fragments and rhythmic  
patterns to compose a suite of pieces "Life Lessons from Beyonce'".  
This included the snippets themselves played with tacky cheesecake  
publicity shots of Beyonce' projected on a screen the size of  
the stage backdrop (huge).  The five parts were titled:  
  
Listen, I don't drink soy....ever  
  
If I granted yo ass wish, call me Miss Party Pants  
  
My tears sound like a single mother  
  
Let's go club a damn baby Sagittarius  
  
You like my footprints like sour candles, you hustler  
  
The players (two guys, three women) came out wearing a lot  
of sparkly clothes and in stiletto heels, though the drummer  
did have to slip his shoes off to sit at the trap set.  
The result of course was about ten minutes of some of the  
most abstruse music you're ever likely to hear, totally wacko  
and very funny.  One wonders whether Beyonce', who is very much  
a commercial product, not an artistic one, takes herself  
seriously at all, and if not, might actually \_like\_ this  
cerebral satire of her public persona.  
     The concert-closer was by a grad-student Kevin Austin,  
and scored for eight or nine saxophones (led by sax professor  
Jonathan Bergeron), a drummer, and that electric typewriter  
(where did they find one that worked?), with a conductor to  
keep it hanging together.  The typewriter was played (ahem)  
by the cute violist from Friday night, and typical of the  
circumstance, its keyboard was videoed and projected on the  
big screen behind the musicians.  Her part was irregular while  
the saxes/drums played strictly motor rhythms.  The typewriter  
part was nevertheless written out, since we could see her  
turning the pages of the score on the typewriter desk,  
as though she were a secretary typing from a manuscript,  
and sometimes the typewriter was feeding rhythmic patterns  
to the band (listen!) --- so as the "soloist" she was having  
to keep an eye on the conductor as the piece progressed.  
     One can be cynical by noting that the six "World Premieres"  
last night were also most likely "Final Performances".  
But I conclude that these folks are like jazzers who can  
spontaneously play some incredible thing, and then just let  
it go out into the aether.  They figure they're creative enough  
that, like Charlie Parker or Keith Jarrett, there's lots more  
where that came from.

Brian Skiff