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