

Review of Undectet Show  
*Garden* by Brent Fariss  
*Mantle* by Travis Weller  
Austin New Music Co-op  
04.29.06

Since 2001 the Austin New Music Co-op has been involved in performing new works by local composers, bringing composers and artists to Austin, and presenting 20<sup>th</sup> century works to Austin audiences. Their recent performance at Ballet Austin's Guadalupe location featured new large scale works by Brent Fariss and Travis Weller. Each piece was composed for a unique ensemble: an undectet, or group of eleven players.

The first piece performed, *Mantle* is the result of a collaboration between Weller and Dorothy Meiburg's poem of the same name, which "describes the earth's mantle as a frontier between solid and molten states." The contrast between the two states seems to reflect the nature of collaboration between two media that cannot quite resolve; verse is contextual and inherently different from music's abstraction, as solid is from liquid.

The piece uses that idea of tension between the two states of solid and liquid by contrasting nonmusical instrumental textures against pitched material. The motion of the pitched material is more of a gradual, unarticulated timbral motion than as an articulated pitch change from note to note. The nonmusical textures used include the sounds of bowing, scraping and sounds from a prepared piano. As the audience was propelled by the piece through the different combinations of textures, it was as if we were seeing different layers of rock and magma on our way to the earth's core – the contrast between them and the variety of timbral combinations we heard were striking.

After a while the piece began to feel like an exploration of the number of different ways the contrast could be expressed in music. In the last third of the piece, an almost exhausted duet between two violins seemed to admit defeat... at that point the composer seemed to scratch himself and had another look at the idea, as the piece moved into a fresh exploration.

In the discipline of *ars memoriae* (the art of memory), the practitioner assigns symbolism to memorized objects in a real space as a mnemonic device. The structure of Fariss' *Garden* suggests that he used a similar system in its composition. The piece is in pointillist fragments, with the instrumental parts delicately woven together on a small scale, and on a larger scale isolated from one another as episodes by moments of silence.

The title and the episodic nature of the piece had me thinking of the motion through the piece as a visual tour through an imagined grotto, with each fragment representing a different object. The fragments are carefully developed enough to where their significance as detailed memory triggers is suggested. Listening, I imagined the garden, each hedge and patch of sunlight carefully delineated by a gentle burst of musical quietude.

The silent sections were largely occupied by the sounds of heavy construction from the street below Ballet Austin. In the speech before the performance, the composer revealed his secondary intention in writing a quiet piece for an urban performance as to create space for the

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street sounds to occupy, in a Cagean sense. Unlike Cage's work, the overall flow of the piece made a systematic composition evident. Rather than letting the sound environment drive or dominate the piece the composer made the brief sections work more as a circle of covered wagons. The space between them lets the listener hear the outside world, but the listener is insulated from that world.