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MUSIC REVIEW | AMERICAN MODERN ENSEMBLE

Standing Room Only for New Music, Fierce and Quiet Alike

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Pessimists about the future of classical music may be looking in the wrong places. There were empty seats at the Metropolitan Opera's estimable "Aida" on Friday night, but on Saturday, "Powerhouse Pianists" filled the Tenri Cultural Institute to its gills, with standees crowding the rim of this small West Village gallery and hopeful ticket buyers stretching out onto 13th Street.

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The American Modern Ensemble is new this year and dedicates its time to American composers. This evening bulged with 10 of them, their music executed alternately by two first-rate pianists, Blair McMillen and [Stephen](#) Gosling.

There were bursts of bright, ringing optimism (Chester Biscardi's "Piano Sonata") and, to call such good thoughts into question, the purposeful brutality of Lee Hyla's "Basic Training": spasmodic violence followed by long silences meant to absorb its energy.

There were a few quieter moments. Eric Moe's "Where Branched Thoughts Murrur in the Wind" was stripped-down counterpoint, a kind of mournful two-part invention. George Tsonkatis's "Bagatelle" swayed and rippled like wind chimes. Annie Gosfield's "Brooklyn, October 5, 1941" remembered a calamitous moment in Dodger history using baseball gear as props. What we mostly heard was a kind of musical factory in tone painting, with machinelike ostinatos pounding, clanking and trilling.

So much 20th-century style was manufactured on the spot, not

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drawn from the past. Conlon Nancarrow, master of the player-piano, was the evening's exemplar in this regard. His "Tango?" sets up a wall of rapid-fire complication and allows snippets of dance music to peek out from behind.

Joan Tower's "Or like a ... an Engine" was as the program notes describe it: "toccatalike" with little rhythmic glitches to interrupt the steady flow of notes. Perry Townsend's "Episodes for Piano" suggest that a lot of young composers (Mr. Biscardi is another) have leapfrogged backward over Schoenberg and his school and are listening to Debussy.

Most of this music was fiercely virtuosic: David Rakowski's "E-Machines" a whirl of repeated notes, and Mischa Zupko's "Five Etudes for Piano" Liszt-like in their florid generosity. This is a worthwhile new organization with what seems a strong fan base and, if Mr. McMillen and Mr. Gosling are examples, performers of high quality.

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