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In Low-Key Buffalo, a New-Music Milestone

By **ALLAN KOZINN**

BUFFALO — This city may not seem as glamorous a place for a summer new-music festival as [Tanglewood](#) in Massachusetts or [Ojai](#) in California, and puzzlingly, the [University at Buffalo](#) does relatively little to promote the annual June in Buffalo festival, which the composer [Morton Feldman](#) founded in 1975.

But June in Buffalo has a sense of mission that has made it an important part of the new-music ecology. Its drawing cards are accomplished new-music performers — among them this year, the [Arditti Quartet](#), [Signal and Ensemble SurPlus](#) — playing works by established composers.

Equally important is the part of the festival devoted to young composers. Every year about 70 apply for 20 to 25 positions as “participants.” Those chosen have their music played by the guest ensembles and dissected in workshops.

This year June in Buffalo, which opened on Monday and runs through Sunday, is celebrating its 35th anniversary, as well as the 25th anniversary of the composer [David Felder](#)’s directorship — or actually, revival — of the festival. When Mr. Felder joined the [University at Buffalo](#) faculty in 1985, June in Buffalo had been dormant for five years. He revived it in 1986.

For his anniversary programs, Mr. Felder has chosen mostly works by composers who had been associated with the festival in past years. [Steve Reich](#), for example, made his first appearance at June in Buffalo in 1976, in a performance with his own ensemble. This time Mr. Reich was on hand, though not as a performer: on Tuesday morning he played a recording of “12 x 5,” his recent work for a chamber ensemble that uses rock

instrumentation, and discussed it in a public interview with Mr. Felder before taking audience questions and heading off to a luncheon where he was given an honorary doctorate.

Mr. Reich left his music in the care of Signal, the New York new-music orchestra conducted by Brad Lubman, who on Monday evening led his charges in driven readings of *Sextet* (1984) and the texturally and rhythmically richer *Double Sextet* (2007). In *Double Sextet*, Signal took the option of performing all 12 lines live, instead of using a live sextet playing against a recorded version of itself. Other ensembles, like *Eighth Blackbird*, have used the tape version, and it would be hard to say with complete assurance that the all-live version is more supple. But there is a lot to be said for seeing 12 performers interacting.

Ensemble SurPlus devoted most of its Tuesday program to thornier works, including [Lukas Foss's](#) *Music for Six* (1978), with its undulating, birdcall-like theme and hazy textures, and Brian Ferneyhough's "Coloratura" (1966), a characterful, pointillistic score with an appealing, virtuosic oboe line. Other Ferneyhough works — "In Nomine a 3" (2001) and "Morte Subite" (1990) — showed this composer's more gracefully tuneful and inventive side. [Charles Wuorinen's](#) lighter side was on display too, in "Spinoff Violin" (1983), a blend of stark angularity and jazz-inflected themes.

The group also offered Minimalism, of a sort, by way of Alvin Lucier's "Fideliotrio" (1987), an exploration of pulsations and timbre shifts within a sustained tone. Morton Feldman was commemorated with a tactile, nuanced performance of "The Viola in My Life II" (1970), and Augusta Read Thomas was represented by "Euterpe's Caprice" (2008), for solo flute, played alluringly by Martina Roth.

Ms. Thomas, who is on the faculty this year, is one of this festival's success stories: she first attended June in Buffalo as a student, in 1989, and has built a flourishing career. Another of her works, the contrast-rich, lightly dissonant set of *Six Piano Études* (2005), was given a commanding reading by Stephen Gosling on Wednesday evening.

The same program included "Kasper" (2010), a multichannel computer work by Olivier Pasquet — who is otherwise here to lecture on electronic music — in which speech fragments and insistent tapping evolve into a wall of percussive sound, slowly mutating organlike chords and shoe-squeaking noises. It was hard to make much of it; it seemed the kind of work you surrender yourself to or not.

Mr. Felder's "Tweeners" (2001-10), an orchestral score with an electronic component, would have been equally puzzling if not for a virtuosic solo marimba part, played by Tom Kolor, which gave the piece both a coherent shape and an ear-catching melodic core. It was performed by the Slee Sinfonietta, a resident chamber orchestra at the university, which

closed the Wednesday evening program with "Aspiration" (2008), a vivid Roger Reynolds work with a series of involving violin cadenzas, played exquisitely by Irvine Arditti.

Mr. Arditti, along with the rest of the Arditti Quartet, spent Thursday morning coaching some of the young composers in their works for quartet. The ensemble's comments were detailed and technical, and often humorous. In Daniel Bassin's haunting "Typographies II: Livre Pour Cordes (in Memoriam Ph. L.-L)," for example, the players worked through brief sections, often stopping to ask why a passage was notated in a particular way.

Other ensembles took different approaches. Signal, on Monday afternoon, and Ensemble SurPlus, on Wednesday afternoon, gave uninterrupted concert readings of 14 works between them, though at the Signal performance, Mr. Lubman and some of the players commented on a few of the scores and offered technical advice.

Signal's student program began with Matthew Heap's "Illicit Trysts," an engagingly noisy, rhythmically sharp-edged essay, full of sudden starts and stops and colorful instrumental effects (including quiet sections that sounded as if they were a tape being played backward).

Sudden starting and stopping proved an unlikely propulsion technique: Ashley Wang's "Intimate Rejection," a solo piano work (played with consummate gracefulness by Eric Huebner) that closed the Signal program, used it, too, in a gentle, Feldmanesque way.

Emily Koh's beautifully eerie "circum perceptio," built in layers of delicate string, piano and woodwind timbres, was another highlight of the Signal program. And Peter Van Zandt Lane's "Magana," with a repeating, syncopated clarinet figure taken up contrapuntally in the cello and percussion writing, was one of several student works that used Minimalist techniques as a springboard but headed off in different directions.

Another, on the Ensemble SurPlus program, was Huck Hodge's "Apparent Motion," which began with a thoroughly Reichian figure and evolved into a harmonically fresh work with a variegated texture full of both sparkle and thunder.

But of the eight works that Ensemble SurPlus offered, the most memorable was Jordan Kuspa's Piano Trio. It was the only score with a blandly formal title. (Its companions had names like "Bless This Mess," by David Wightman, and "Diagram of a Polymathic Persona/Diagram of a Failure to Diversify," by Ray Evanoff.)

And both structurally and harmonically, Mr. Kuspa's trio was the most conservative piece on the program. But his writing here was sharply focused, carefully shaped and attuned to

coloristic possibilities of the piano, violin and cello. The resulting four-movement work, animated and melodically opulent, sounded consistently alive and inspired.

Mr. Kuspa's piece called to mind something Mr. Reich had said in his talk on Tuesday morning. When one student commented that another composer had said that there was nothing new under the sun, Mr. Reich quickly said, "Sour grapes."

"Your job is to write music that is about who you are," he added, "to figure out who you are and what your assignment is, here on this earth. The messages are out there, if we have our antennas up."

The June in Buffalo festival runs through Sunday at the University at Buffalo, www.music.buffalo.edu/juneinbuffalo.