



Talea Ensemble Erik Carlson and Elizabeth Weisser, in a concert of works written for the group, at Tenri Cultural Institute on Friday.

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A Few Unusual Suspects Drop By

By **STEVE SMITH**

Befuddlement is a common condition among audience members at concerts of contemporary classical music, probably causing some potential listeners to stay away. But is it really such a bad thing to be confused by how a sound is produced, or to wonder why a piece takes the form it does? To the contrary, a concert presented by the [Talea Ensemble](#) at the Tenri Cultural Institute on Friday evening showed how perplexity could charm and delight.

Talea, formed in 2007 by the percussionist Alex Lipowski and the pianist Anthony Cheung, has a sterling reputation for championing composers whose works extend the modernist tradition. Complexity is the group's bread and butter; supreme technique and personable conviction make everything it does matter.

Here the ensemble focused on pieces written especially for it; presumably, the composers

involved knew what a bountiful opportunity for tinkering their assignments entailed. To say that they took full advantage is an understatement. I can't recall being as baffled by any recent work as I was by [V́ctor Adán's](#) "Tractus," which opened the program.

That is not a complaint. Everything about the piece — its [elegant circular score](#); its fidgety, alien sound world; the ritual sobriety with which it unfolded — was transfixing. The violinist Erik Carlson and the violist Elizabeth Weisser scrubbed hisses and squeals on their instruments' [bridges and top nuts](#). Tara Helen O'Connor and Rane Moore puffed through primitive ocarinas and twittered almost inaudibly on [nano-tonal mouth organs](#): blocky clusters of dog whistles, invented by Mr. Adán. Mr. Lipowski applied a bow to nearly everything in reach, making a flexatone wail and a block of plastic foam squeal.

[Ashley Fure's](#) "Therefore I Was," a clamorous procession of extreme sounds played by Mr. Lipowski (whose bow now made a cardboard box moan), the cellist Andrea Lee and the pianist Steven Beck, could have been nearly as mystifying if no less satisfying. But in a program note Ms. Fure wrote that the work was inspired by her grandmother's struggle with the effects of Parkinson's disease. Heard in that light, the work's agonized gestures, halting pace and tense silences denoted courage and ineffable dignity.

"Capriccio," by [Hans Thomalla](#), played off the familiar accessibility of its title; Ms. Moore, on clarinet, and a string trio played melodic lines that wobbled and collided, taking on a patina of noisy detritus before dissipating into nothingness. In "Incident and Scatter," [Eric Chasalow](#) fashioned giddy interaction between a live sextet and recorded electronics, playfully derailing anticipated resolutions throughout. But paradoxically Mr. Chasalow's digital palette could seem oddly pedestrian compared with the flamboyant acoustic sounds heard in previous works.

Talea ended the evening with "Bateau Ivre," in which a Rimbaud-inspired John Zorn swathes his customary fractiousness in luminous gauzes pinched from Pierre Boulez's linen closet.

Encountered previously in a memorable [Miller Theater event](#), the seductive work was still more alluring on renewed acquaintance. Here, and in all the works except Mr. Adán's, the conductor James Baker provided diligent guidance.

The Talea Ensemble next performs in New York on April 20 at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music, 450 West 37th Street, Manhattan; taleaensemble.org.