

SummerFest offers 'Music of Our Time'

But what time is it really in SummerFest's annual program of contemporary works?



[\(/staff/james-chute/\)](#)

By [James Chute \(/staff/james-chute/\)](#) | 12:02 a.m. Aug. 26, 2015



Composer Clarice Assad

You might as well put up a big sign saying: Danger! Contemporary Music Ahead.

Instead, La Jolla Music Society SummerFest calls its annual nod to new music, "Music of Our Time."

Not every piece by a living composer performed in the festival was on that program. Joel Hoffman's memorable "of Deborah, for Deborah," was on the Aug. 9 program dedicated to his sister, and Steven Schick's Aug. 12 percussion performance brought a welcome and welcomed dose of new music.

But virtually every one of the other 13 SummerFest concerts was or is devoid of music by living composers, except for Tuesday's "Music of Our Time" program in Sherwood.

What does that say to audiences about the "Music of Our Time"? Apparently they are getting the message loud and clear, as Tuesday's concert will likely go down as the least attended SummerFest concert this year.

Surprisingly, however, there was one dangerous piece on Tuesday's largely innocuous program: Chen Yi's 2001 "Ning" for Pipa, Violin and Cello. It was the oldest piece on the program and the only one on the concert not co-commissioned by the La Jolla Music Society (the Music Society did commission two pieces from Chen Yi in 2004).

Inspired by the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, Chen Yi's piece captures the horror and chaos of the event, but also the soul searching and the uncomfortable silence that followed.

With its dissonance, snippets of melody, and lack of a tonal center, "Ning" is not an easy piece to listen to, but the total investment in the work by pipa player Wu Man, violinist (and SummerFest music director) Cho-Liang Lin and cellist Ben Hong commanded the audience's attention, and the silence that followed the final notes, which seemed to evaporate into thin air, spoke volumes about the power of Chen Yi's music.

In its musical vocabulary, in its concern with an event that defies reconciliation and resolution and thus continues to affect world events, Chen is speaking to us; he's saying something about us and our time.

What did composers Peter Schickele, Clarice Assad and Derek Bermel, the three composers who work was co-commissioned by the festival, say about our time?

Schickele, better known as P.D.Q. Bach, tells us we're in an era of nostalgia, of yearning for a simpler time, in the pleasant but ultimately forgettable "Spring Ahead" Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet.

In contrast to the commitment shown by Wu Man, Lin and Hong in Chen Yi's work, clarinetist Burt Hara and the Huntington Quartet (one of the festival's student ensembles) gave Schickele's piece the offhand treatment they apparently thought it deserved and not surprisingly, that was the way it was received by the audience.

Assad dealt with one of the big issues of the day: the internet and social media in "Synchronous." But she too dealt in nostalgia, especially in the easy-listening first movement, "Sunrise Reverie." The second movement, "News Feed," was a little livelier, but she seemed to have trouble bringing the piece to a close. So it just stopped. (Maybe the internet is like that as well.)

Oboist Liang Wang, violinists Andrew Wan and Fabiola Kim, violist Robert Brophy and cellist JeongHyoun Lee gave Assad a definitive performance.

Even Derek Bermel, in his trio "Death with Interruptions" (performed by violinist David Chan, cellist Clive Greensmith and pianist John Novacek) looked to the past for a tune that would have been a home in a pop standard.

However, the imaginative way Bermel eventually treated that theme, his sense of exploration (of other musical styles and genres), his curiosity and a convincing ending made this a piece you'd like to hear again.

Indeed, Bermel was almost dangerous.

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