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Orchestral Manoeuvres at the Armory

paul david young 03/09/12

This year for the first time the annual Armory Show has a program of performance and film. It is modest, to be sure, but it could prove a refreshing alternative to viewing the booths.

The program got off to a firm start on Wednesday at the VIP preview with an unusual composition by Icelandic artist Örn Alexander Ámundason, "Kreppa: A symphonic poem about the financial situation in Iceland," superbly performed by the Metropolis Ensemble, a New York chamber orchestra that specializes in new music and contemporary composition.

Ámundason, whose other work includes sculpture and a reenactment of the worst performance art that the artists he surveyed could recall, transposed the tones of 13 speeches by key players in Iceland's financial crisis ("kreppa" in Icelandic) onto 13 instruments. He used computer software that recognizes pitch in human speech to obtain his score, inputting the speeches in the order that they occurred historically. He limited his score to the tones the computer recognized in the speeches, including none of the usual notations instructing the musicians how to play the notes and leaving much open to improvisation.

The result strangely and rather convincingly resembled a piece of early 12-tone music of the Viennese variety, perhaps because the human voice is naturally serial, repeating tonal patterns within a restricted range.

Despite the method of its composition, the music held its own and seemed to tell a story, perhaps at least as intelligible as the verbal ones in circulation among most commentators. Ámundason chose his instruments with an ear for music and some humor. The double bass at the beginning, representing a controversial Icelandic politician, gave way to a succession of instruments, often playing at the same time though by no means the same notes. The chronological sequence ended with a ukulele, standing in for the openly lesbian prime minister elected in 2009, after the fall of the laissez-faire conservative government that had presided over the spectacular collapse of Iceland's banks and financial system. The protestors, who came out in Iceland in force well before the Occupiers, are heard as a marimba, intoning with the clarity of bells the voices of the people in the streets.

Artistic Director Andrew Cyr conducted the extremely able musicians of the Metropolis Ensemble.

Armory Performance is curated by Malmö Konsthall director Jacob Fabricius, who is also curating the "Armory Focus: Nordic Countries," a selection of Scandinavian galleries in Pier 94.

Photo: Shaun Mader. Courtesy of The Armory Show



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