

Bespoke Works For Ensemble Whose Focus Is New Music

When Alarm Will Sound, the unusually versatile, reliably exhilarating new-music ensemble, made its Zankel Hall debut in 2006, Carnegie Hall celebrated the occasion with a newly commissioned work, Wolfgang Rihm's "Will Sound." As the group's borderless tastes and voracious appetite became better known, the ensemble and its admirable artistic director, Alan Pierson, inspired more composers to tailor pieces for its superb players. On Saturday night Alarm Will Sound returned to Zankel for a fashionably late outing meant to showcase its bespoke canon.

Again, Carnegie Hall provided a new piece, "Fly by Wire," by Tyondai Brax-



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Alarm Will Sound Alan Pierson leading this ensemble in a program of commissioned pieces at Zankel Hall on Saturday night.

ton, a multi-instrumentalist known for his work in the math-rock band Battles and a composer now in demand for high-profile engagements. Mr. Braxton's piece flitted among styles with a cartoonish energy. But his leaps never felt abrupt: fidgeting strings, chattering percussion, a flatulent trombone and a cinematic gallop in triple time coexisted

Alan Pierson will conduct *Crash Ensemble* on May 17 at Zankel Hall, Carnegie Hall; (212) 247-7800, carnegiehall.org.

peaceably in his playfully surreal conception.

That seven-minute premiere shared the concert's first half with three works of similar concision. "Journeyman," by the Alarm Will Sound pianist John Orfe, opened the program with a gleaming Neo-Classical integrity — all tart harmonies, deftly balanced timbres and assertive beat.

Opposites attract in Alarm Will Sound's worldview. The group quietly underscored the rigor in David Lang's

"increase," conveying with ease a tension behind its placid repetitions and subtle shifts. They brought out the wild energy and abundant wit in Charles Wuorinen's "Big Spinoff," enhancing its finely tooled writhing and thunderous percussion volleys with commitment and clout. The program's second half brought "Scenes from 'The Hunger,'" part of a work in progress by the Irish composer Donnacha Dennehy. In previous pieces, including two featured on a superb 2011 Nonesuch CD, "Gra agus Bas," Mr. Dennehy has explored the ex-

pressive potential of sean nos, an Irish vocal tradition known for its plaintive tone, wide leaps and microtonal inflections.

One piece on that CD featured Iarla O Lionaird, a traditional Irish vocalist; the other had the soprano Dawn Upshaw singing in an art-song style informed by sean nos. (Both singers will perform with Mr. Dennehy's Crash Ensemble at Zankel Hall in May.) Here, in music destined for an evening-length work for Mr. O Lionaird and Ms. Upshaw about the great Irish famine of the mid-19th century, Mr. Dennehy conjoined those approaches.

Several selections ingeniously integrated vintage vocal recordings; live instrumental lines flexed and slurred in eerie concord with limber phantom voices. In a long, achingly evocative sequence based on an American observer's account of the famine, the mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway sang with a precision and purity associated with Ms. Upshaw.

In this piece and throughout a concert enhanced by superb audio engineering and subtle lighting effects, Mr. Pierson and his musicians played with an exactness and verve that might inspire any composer to dream big.

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