

MUSIC REVIEW

Vaudeville and Avant-Garde Strings

By ALLAN KOZINN
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The two shows at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) on Monday evening, though both rooted in classical music, could not have been more different. At the early show Polkastra, a virtuosic polka ensemble led by the violinist Lara St. John, with the composer Ronn Yedidia as its accordionist, played wildly idiosyncratic arrangements and original music from its new recording, "Apolkalyse Now." A more restrained sort of virtuosity governed the late show, the Jack Quartet's program of avant-garde string quartets in the Moving Sound Festival's final concert.

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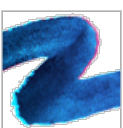


G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times
Polkastra: From left, Daniel Lapp, Lara St. John and Andy Doe at Le Poisson Rouge on Monday evening.

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Polkastra was billed as world music at Le Poisson Rouge, but that was true only in the sense that Ms. St. John and company drew some of their repertory from Eastern European popular dance music, including a few Moldavian folk pieces and a hora that Ms. St. John found on an old 78-r.p.m. disc of Gypsy fiddle music. But if you think of world music as a branch of ethnomusicology, with ensembles from far-flung cultures offering more or less authentic programs of their native cultural treasures, this was something else.

Mostly it was polyglot vaudeville. Between the Eastern European dances the musicians played works of their own (most notably Mr. Yedidia's "Flying Gypsy Polka," a vigorous accordion workout, and Daniel Lapp's "Victoria Commonwealth Polka," a folksy, dueling violin score); a World War I ballad ("Meanwhile, Somewhere in France"); plenty of Western Hemisphere country fiddling; a Celtic reel; and comically fractured medleys of [Beethoven](#) and Wagner themes.

The classical pieces, which also included a radically rescored edition of Johann Strauss Jr.'s "Leichtes Blut," were arranged by Matt van Brink, who joined the ensemble on the

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accordion in "The Ride of the Polkaries," his Wagner romp. Mr. van Brink owes a great deal to Spike Jones — not least the use of zany percussive effects — and the band's energetic, freewheeling performances made these arrangements as much fun as Jones's classic sendups.

The traditional pieces were not immune from quirky rescoring: the "Clarinet Polka," a standard of the form, was deftly played by the bassoonist Mark Timmerman. Much of the set was silly stuff, in a good way, and a reminder that musical comedy works best when the musicianship is first-rate.

For its late set the Jack Quartet played works by two like-minded composers, Aaron Cassidy, an American based in Britain, and Beat Furrer, an Austrian whose prismatic "Xenos" was played at Le Poisson Rouge on Saturday. Both composers seem drawn to fragmentation. You will wait in vain for long (or, for that matter, short) themes in either Mr. Cassidy's String Quartet (2002) or Mr. Furrer's String Quartet No. 3 (2004); and in Mr. Furrer's work especially, pregnant silences are nearly as plentiful as notes.

Mr. Cassidy's piece had the virtue of compactness. His quartet lasts only seven minutes, and though he avoided letting its stream of pizzicatos, slides and invitingly peculiar string timbres coalesce into shapely lines, he created a web of compelling rhythmic effects that left you wanting to hear more when the music suddenly evaporated.

Mr. Furrer's score, at about 45 minutes, is grander in scope. Like Mr. Cassidy he is drawn to pizzicato sounds, but he has his players form them in unusual ways. One approach involves combining different attacks — a snapped violin string and a cello string plucked with a mellow, rounded tone — to create a molded, tactile sound. These combinations recur throughout the work, and they are so distinctive that in the absence of returning and developing themes they clarify the work's structure and shape.

That said, creating structural signposts does not seem to be Mr. Furrer's main concern. Listening to this stream of whispered sounds, toneless bowing, sudden slides and snap-thump pizzicatos, it seemed clear that this is music to become immersed in, not music to analyze.

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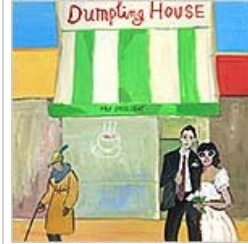
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