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Music review: Teddy bears and toothbrushes at Zipper Hall

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The teddy bear was in fine form Monday. With a little help from his friend, he played a snappy variation on an Italian folk tune on the piano. Miss Piggy and her pal knocked out, in clumsy tone clusters, her own charming version of another tune. The little dolly was oh, so sweet. She and her droll handler tapped out a dainty one-finger call and response on the keys.

The 27 electric toothbrushes buzzed on the piano strings as they were meant to do. But the DVD player was busted. The TV showed only snow. Luciano Chessa, a composer from Italy who teaches in San Francisco, was responsible for these shenanigans in two of his pieces that ended the [Monday Evening Concert](#) at the Colburn School's Zipper Concert Hall.

The program was called Mostly Californian. It was a mixed bill of composers, none of whom hailed from the West. But that, I guess, is contemporary California for you: a state that still draws the curious and cutting edge but can no longer be counted on to make everything work.

Chessa's a scholar of Italian Futurism, as well as of Italy's 14th century music and of the country's

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current hip-hop scene. He's a virtuoso of the musical saw and Vietnamese *dan bau*. He is, it hardly needs mentioning, a bit eccentric.

Dressed in a white shirt and black vest, Chessa performed "Variazioni su un Ogetto di Scena" ("Variations on Scenic Subjects"), bringing a different stuffed animal or doll out for all of the three variations. With the "companions" on his lap, he guided each through its variation.

"Louganis" is Chessa's tribute to the Olympics star Greg Louganis. "I stretch my body to the water," the swimmer once wrote. Chessa followed suit by stretching the piano to produce the sound of crashing waves. He turned on and carefully placed the toothbrushes inside the piano so that they would rattle the strings in thickly vibrating chords. He changed the tide by holding down certain keys, and when he wanted other sorts of vibrations, he shook his wrists, on which were bracelets of bells.

There was a stage set for "Louganis," which included a nicely designed retro chair, a table with a lamp and the flat-screen TV. The Monday Evening Concerts [website](#) features a video introduction that shows what video artist Terry Berlier's oceanic accompaniment was supposed to look like. But Chessa soldiered on with his dental hygiene pianism through the television static, making no announcement that anything should be otherwise. The result wasn't ineffective.

Chessa's works concluded a program that began with Clint McCallum's striking "In a Hall of Mirrors Waiting to Die," for screaming soprano saxophone (wailing in long passages on a single, mind-alteringly loud and high pitch) and piano. He's a Coloradan who studied at UC San Diego but has not lost his cowboy hat.

That was followed by Webern's crystalline Quartet for violin, clarinet, saxophone and piano, which was written in 1930 by an Austrian avant-gardist who never crossed the Atlantic. There were no long notes here for the saxophonist Eliot Gattegno or pianist Eric Wubbels, just a complex circuitry of intense and beautiful tiny snippets of melody. The clarinetist in an expert and lush performance was Benjamin Lulich and the violinist, David Fulmer.

Fulmer followed that by conducting Milton Babbitt's 1957 "All Set," in which Webernian 12-tone intricacy meets an eight-member jazz band. California didn't have anything to do with this piece either, but Babbitt, an *echt*-East Coast Modernist from Mississippi, did here prove for the first time that serialism could cook.

And then there was Michael Pisaro's "The Collection." Based at CalArts (by way of Buffalo and Chicago), he is probably best known in Germany. His "Transparent City" may be a nearly five-hour sonic portrait of L.A., but the recordings of street sounds from around town on the Edition Wandelweiser Records are far easier to find in Munich than locally.


"The Collection" is for 20 players who barely play. Pisaro's Dog Star Orchestra included traditional, folk and electronic instruments and the musicians sat in two rows confrontationally facing the audience. But there was no confrontation, just spare, quiet sounds at the edge of audibility.

Pisaro calls these sounds "time pools." He gives his players scant instructions, asking them to make a certain sound or two here and there. One section is repeated tuning. The composer's job appears to be to urge silence to reveal its secrets. A listener can strain to hear interesting detail or fall into reverie. Both options proved pleasant.

West Coast Left Coast, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's somewhat more conventional take on California late last year, was, for a traditional big-budget symphony orchestra, a remarkable statement about what is possible on this side of the country. But the MEC has always been an advance guard, and Monday it remained on the front lines, where it belongs.

-- Mark Swed

Photo: Luciano Chessa with friend. Credit: Courtesy of Chessa.

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