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Mannes Percussion Ensemble Performs Marcos Balter

By **ZACHARY WOOLFE** DEC. 3, 2013



Mannes Percussion Ensemble Jeffrey Kautz, left, and Jordan Holley performing Marcos Balter's "Dark Rooms" (2007) at Mannes College the New School for Music.

Jacob Blickenstaff for The New York Times

At the start of the Mannes Percussion Ensemble's concert on Monday evening [James Baker](#), the ensemble's director, announced a change in the program. Two planned works had been dropped, he said, because the group had decided it would rather prepare fewer pieces at a higher level of polish than bite off more than it could comfortably chew.

Many others — orchestras and recitalists alike — could benefit from this philosophy. On Monday, in the Concert Hall at [Mannes College the New School for Music](#), it resulted in a tight, impressive performance that gave the valuable opportunity to hear relatively recent works by composers now in their late 30s: [Marcos Balter's](#) “Dark Rooms” (2007) and [Hiroya Miura's](#) “Puncture Me” (2001, revised in 2006). Both pieces, as Mr. Baker observed, for the most part used standard orchestral percussion instruments but brought out of them a range of sounds and moods.

Alternately brooding and aggressive, “Dark Rooms” began with the players — Joshua Azenberg, Jordan Holley, Jeffrey Kautz and Jessica Tsang — dragging the wooden tips of their mallets up and down marimba keys, drawing a sound that was sharply keening yet muted, like screams in a distant room. Mr. Balter showed skill at juxtaposing textures milky and twinkling and at subtly modulating pace, not by changing the tempo but by adding and subtracting different layers of sound.

While the score of Mr. Miura's “Puncture Me” is prefaced by a short poem that mixes sex and violence, the music is less erotic than erratic. Jumpy riffs would be allowed to resonate for a moment before dissolving into jitters. Sounds that seemed to bend abounded, from the bowing of a saw to the massage of a gong to the dying note of a struck floor tom. Even though it was just a trio (Mr. Kautz sat this one out), the piece is complex enough that Mr. Baker conducted it.

It was a concert that felt at home in a changing Mannes School. The dean, Richard Kessler, has sought to leaven the school's reputation for respectable, sometimes stodgy traditionalism with a revised curriculum and new faculty members. Those teachers include omnivorous artists like the pianist Jeremy Denk, the violinist Miranda Cuckson, the cellist Jeffrey Zeigler and the composers Missy Mazzoli and Lowell Liebermann. Mr. Liebermann [told Opera News](#) he took the job because of the opportunity to start a Mannes American Composers Ensemble focused on new music.

Monday's concert was very much in this spirit, placing virtuosity and technical security — long perceived as the core goals of a Mannes education — in the service of new sounds by young composers. The school should be commended for recognizing at long last that young musicians need Balter as much as Bach.

The Mannes American Composers Ensemble performs Dec. 13 at 8 p.m., Mannes College the New School for Music, 150 West 85th Street, Manhattan; free, newschool.edu/Mannes/events.