

Birmingham offers Multiple Music options

By Michaeli Shaw
Staff writer

Students on the Birmingham-Southern campus cannot complain that they have no culture. Actually, it seems that many students think they are forced into having too much. I disagree. This campus is blessed with the shared artistic talent of students, professors and guests, and with the public exhibition of this talent.

For example, last year, a friend of mine arranged to have part of *Cremaster Cycle*, an avant-garde art film, shown as a cultural credit. This same friend helped supervise the opening of a Student Art Gallery in the basement of New Men's. The gallery hosted two openings, showcasing two student artists each.

Now, I am a very musically inclined person. Most of the events I attend are concerts or recitals. For students like me, a variety of artistic alternatives are available in a far corner of the academic quad, a little building that is a haven for many a music major: the Hill Music Building.

Within the span of one week, I attended three awe-inspiring performances in the Hill Recital Hall. The first of these, David Smith's voice recital on Sunday, Oct. 10, was an impressive display of angst-ridden Schubert. Though not a huge fan of Schubert myself, I could appreciate the enormous talent it took for Dr. Smith to sing with such emotion. An enthusiastic Dr. Lester Seigel accompanied him on piano.

Both professors performed admirably, and I was one of the first to stand for the ovation when the recital had ended. (Of course, this has little to do with the fact that Dr. Smith handles my voice lessons.)

The next performance I attended was later that week, on Tuesday, Oct. 12. The Corona Guitar Quartet (CGK), based out of Denmark, had a play list of edgy, a-tonal works. These included two world premier performances of pieces composed expressly for the CGK by two of our own professors, Dorothy Hindman and Charles Norman Mason.

Hindman's piece, "Taut," was performed in the first half of the concert. "Taut" started out in a simple, skittish melody that slowly evolved into an intensely restless explosion of sound. It certainly lived up to its suggestive title. Halfway through the strange work, my toe was tapping helplessly to an elusive rhythm—but it was tapping. Mason's "Filibuster" left me a bit more flustered, searching for a non-extant pattern in a musical world of chaos.

Sometimes these things get a little too avant-garde for me. However, I can appreciate the concept of these defiant works and am glad that I have the chance to be exposed to them. Throwing off convention and tak-

ing an experimental approach is what these cats live for. Pushing the boundaries of what a certain instrument is "supposed" to sound like is everyday for these musicians and composers. I, however, was surprised when I heard what sounded like a muted, metallic bell in the middle of a guitar concert.

The third and final exhibition of musical talent I saw that week was Karen Bentley Pollick's Oct. 14 Thursday evening violin recital. Even though the concert I attended was really only a dress rehearsal, I left the building teary-eyed, overwhelmed by the passion and precision with which she and Adam Bowles, her accompanist, played. Delving into a menagerie of different styles, Bentley Pollick attacked each new piece with zest and fervor. Jumping from a Beethoven Sonata to the unaccompanied "Samba for Karen" (written especially for her), she revealed her uninhibited nature as she expressed the "hip-motion" the composer had demanded of the Samba.

After an atonal and altogether *too* progressive selection, a three-movement piece composed by Charles Ives entitled "Autumn," caused me to forgive all. A medley of familiar melodies disrupted by just the right amount of unexpected atonality produced an overpowering emotion in me. By the middle of the second movement, tears were streaming down my face as Bentley Pollick tore into wave after wave of climactic sound. When I left, I felt as though she had wrenched my heart out of my ribcage and sang to it with every ounce of feeling she possessed, and that was only the dress rehearsal.

Attending events such as these, Karen Bentley Pollick's recital in particular, makes me wonder why so many students are upset about attending cultural events. I do, however, realize that while I was brought up attending concerts like these, many students are not used to sitting quietly through two hours of music that they can't relate to. Knowing this makes me very aware that I am lucky. To be able to appreciate the beauty and talent involved in making music of this caliber is a blessing for which I am extremely thankful.

By Ashley Pope
Staff writer

Memphis, Nashville and New Orleans. Atlanta even. When Birmingham citizens want to hear good music, it usually involves a road trip.

Sure, the state has had its share of stars—Tammy Wynette, Lionel Richie and Hank Williams. But if our celebrities are any indication, Alabama's musical output is limited to gospel and the honkey tonk. Or so I thought.

My revelation began when I was offered extra credit to attend a concert featuring avant-guard, Alabama composers. They called it Birmingham Art-Music Alliance. BAMA.

"Alive composers?" I thought. "From Alabama?" I was a little skeptical.

That night my dreams were haunted by synthesized banjos, computer-manipulated fiddles, atonal beeps and robotic rhythms. I woke up in a cold sweat.

"There's no way," I thought over my bowl of cheerios the next morning. Then I remembered last week's music theory test. I decided that five bonus points could not hurt. A few hours later, I took a deep breath and walked into Hill Recital Hall expecting the worst.

As the lights dimmed, a clarinetist and pianist walked onto the stage. They bowed. "Nothing strange so far," I thought to myself, settling into my chair.

The pianist struck a chord. What came out sounded nothing like a piano. The melody was something like a metallic tinker, and the accompaniment was a dull thud. I was horrified.

"What did they do to it?" I wondered, flipping through the program notes.

"Prepared piano," it read. "A relatively new technique utilized by modern composers. Objects, such as paper and pencils, are placed on the strings in order to experiment with the different possible sounds of the instrument."

The clarinetist turned his back on the audience and began to play into the open lid of the piano. The rich tones blended with the clank of the paper-clipped Steinway.

Hey, that's not bad," I thought to myself. I closed my eyes and started to enjoy it.

"I'm glad you tried it," said Dr. Dorothy Hindman, a member of the music faculty at Birmingham-Southern College. Hindman is a practicing composer and a founding member of BAMA, the only group in Birmingham that performs music by living classical and avant-garde composers.

"Part of our mission is to explode stereotypes," said Hindman. "New music isn't ugly and it's not weird. We play the right kind of music for a certain type of listener. If they don't get it here, they're not going to get it anywhere, and that would be a loss." With a mischievous grin, she added, "this is music for the adventurous listener." It's the truth. I've gone to two of their concerts since my first BAMA experience last spring and I've been surprised both times. I sit down and pull out the program, but the titles are not much help. The pieces are named Rusty Banks' "Big Fiddle Ballet," Donnie Ashworth's "Of Shiny Flutes and Demented Chimes" and Brian Moon's "Schizophrenic."

A typical BAMA concert is not organized by genre. They play whatever happens to have been written in Alabama recently. It could be anything.

"That way there's something for everybody," said Hindman. "It's okay if you hate the first piece. The second one is going to be completely different."

It is normal for a new music concert to have a small audience. According to Hindman, there are usually between 20 and 200 attendants. She says forty percent of any audience has probably never heard new music before. So, I was not alone in my initial skepticism. The mainstream public tends to view new music like they do modern art.

"This is a mess, not music," we say. "It is not art. Any child could do it." This attitude is nothing new. People have always resisted the unfamiliar.

So why challenge ourselves? Why not just listen to what is comfortable?

The answer is that music is not static but constantly evolving. New music is the music of our time. These are the pieces that will be in the music history textbooks. One hundred years from now, it is what people will associate with our generation. For this reason, it is important that we keep an open mind expose ourselves to it as much as possible.

We should not just stop with Beethoven, but experiment and push ourselves. Check out fliers in bookstores. Look through the Black and White and The Birmingham Weekly. There's a lot more happening musically in the city than I realized.

NORTHPOINTS



CORONA GUITAR KVARTET

CGK performed works by Dorothy Hindman and Charles Mason in an October 12th performance.