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Winning election concert

By Timothy Pfaff
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

THE WAR MEMORIAL Green Room may have been the only place in the Bay Area where everyone came out a winner Tuesday night. An overflow audience for Composers, Inc.'s "Election Night Special" encountered that rarest of "new music" events: a concert of recent compositions, all of which warranted (and rewarded) careful listening.

By offering a manageable amount of material played by musicians who know it intimately, have rehearsed it thoroughly and perform it insightfully, Composers, Inc. avoided the pitfalls of many such events, and shrewd program planning guaranteed variety.

The first half was piano music, including the West Coast premiere of one book of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Twelve New Etudes" of William Bolcom (the only composer not in the audience), performed by Berkeley pianist Lois Brandwynne. The second showcased the Alexander String Quartet in world premieres of Peter Lewis' "Night Lights" (1983) and Robert Greenberg's "Child's Play" (1988).

Brandwynne lent cogency to Elinor Armer's "Thaw," written for her in 1975. The piece had Brandwynne crawling, adroitly, over the whole keyboard. It makes such heavy use of all three pedals that sustained, attenuated and otherwise enhanced sounds overlap with startling, often jarring results. The piece sustains interest, too, although this listener missed the "warming into life from a frozen state" the composer intended.

By contrast, Andrew Imbrie's deeply felt "Daedalus" (1986) speaks with pointillist intensity; there's not a wasted note. Brandwynne played it with fierce concen-

tration, bringing out its emotional content without distortion.

Her confident readings underplayed the technical challenges in Bolcom's accessible, delectable, richly varied etudes. Brandwynne's trenchant playing savored the jazzy inflections of "Recitatif," the stark contrasts of "Nocturn" and the orchestral sonorities of the "Hymn to Love."

Only a better piano and a quieter room could have enhanced Brandwynne's penetrating performances. Though she lacked both, she played along good-naturedly.

Expert first performances are an important ingredient in the success of new works. Gratefully, the consistently thrilling playing of the Alexander String Quartet — Eric Pritchard and Frederick Lifshitz, violins, Paul Yarbrough, viola and Sandy Wilson, cello — pointed up rather than substituted for the high quality of the two new quartets.

A short, two-movement piece (played as one), "Night Lights" derives its musical argument from, of all things, melodies — lyrical melodies with strong, clear profiles. That, along with the committed, no-holds-barred performance by the Alexander, made the work absorbable on a first hearing without sounding facile or glib.

The Alexander produces such a robust, well-balanced sound and has such an alert, winning stage presence that it could probably "sell" just about any score it addresses. Fortunately, it also has the collective taste to concentrate on important new music.

"Child's Play," a 21-minute, three-movement work dedicated to and written for the Alexander, emerges as such a score. Greenberg develops his quartet from a single repeated note from all four players that is quickly inflected into fast-paced series of musical sequences ("Games") that tellingly, even pictorially, evoke games children actually play. The brooding, eerie reveries of the central "Dreams of Gold" give way to a perpetual motion finale ("Dance") of dizzying brilliance and affirmation.

The Alexander, lavishing a playful seriousness on the fresh new work, gave it the kind of premiere composers dream of.