

New-Music Award Winner Upstaged

By Joshua Kosman
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The artistic directors of Composers, Inc., made an inexplicable decision in awarding the group's annual \$1,000 composition prize to "Orpheus Over and Under," a micro-thin work for two pianos by New York composer David Lang. But they compensated by providing it with three attractive and substantial companion pieces for the same forces.

All four works were ably performed in the War Memorial Green Room Tuesday night — two of them for the first time — by Zita Carno and Gloria Cheng, a duo based in Los Angeles. In the end, the short, agreeable concert amounted to a silk purse fashioned from a prizewinning sow's ear.

Faced with the difficulties and expense of programming a two-piano piece, Frank La Rocca and Robert Greenberg went to their desks and came up with new works that could fill out the program. Elinor Armer, a third member of the group, provided "Aeolus," written in 1986.

Greenberg's "In Shape," which occupied the second half of the program, was the largest and most ambitious of the three, a broad 22-minute "concerto" for two pianos and marimba. Its three movements are traditionally conceived: a boldly dramatic opening movement followed by a slow, songful centerpiece and — without a break — an explosive, rapid-fire finale. As if out of deference to the marimba, the piano writing is notably percussive, even jangly.

What emerges is a fascinating, lively score, full of vibrant splashes of color and rhythmic interest. The edgy, argumentative first movement proved a bit too much to take in at once (even the composer admits the music is "bombastic"), but the urgency and resourcefulness of the writing were unmistakable.

The slow movement, opening with a reflective aria for the marimba, is a beautiful piece of writing, and the ferocious finale, with its pounding accompaniments a la Bartok or Prokofiev, made a wonderfully dramatic effect. Percussionist David Johnson joined Carno and Cheng for a scintillating rendition.

La Rocca's five-minute "Diver-timento" was conceived as a light,

entertaining curtain-raiser, and it fulfilled that function admirably. It sets a few prominent tunes, centered on the black keys, against rapid chordal accompaniments and rhythmic play, for an effect that is altogether jaunty. If the opening gesture sounds a little too insistently like a rewrite of "Rhapsody in Blue," the piece reasserts its individuality soon enough.

Armer's charming eight-minute score, which takes its title from the Greek god of the wind and its epigraph from Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," is a splashy, picturesque bit of tone-painting. Swooshing up and down the keyboard in terse glissandos and little chromatic outbursts, the music paints a convincing picture of its subject, breeze and gale alike. Armer's gestures seemed more vivid than her choice of pitches or harmony, but the overall effect was persuasive.

And then there was "Orpheus." Lang, who won this prize three years ago for his "Illumination Rounds," is a genuine composer, but this was a shockingly lazy and self-satisfied piece of work. The music is ostensibly minimalist, but it adopts all of the bad habits of Reich and Glass — excess, dullness, complacency — without the texture, shapeliness or simple sincerity that make their best music work.

It begins with a germ of an interesting idea — the distinctive sound of extremely rapid repeated notes on a piano — and then does absolutely nothing with it for 20 long minutes (one observer suggested retitling the piece "Orpheus Over and Over"). The first half of the piece, dubbed "Aria," assembles the repeated notes into a single melodic line; the second, "Chorale," adds chords to the mix. None of it adds up to much.