

Fine Mix of Music For Composers, Inc.

Three new works and an Adams 'classic'

By Joshua Kosman

Chronicle Staff Critic

Three new pieces and a slightly older one that is beginning to feel like standard repertoire made for an entirely satisfying concert Tuesday night in the Green Room of the Veterans War Memorial.

The occasion was the season's second concert by Composers, Inc., and it included nicely varied fare from composers Cindy Cox, Benjamin Lees and Robert Greenberg. For the traditional-minded, the program was rounded out by "Phrygian Gates," John Adams' landmark piece of minimalism from 1978; it was played with sensuous urgency by its original interpreter, Mack McCray.

Unbridled percussion figured prominently in the evening's music. The program began with Cox's "Four Studies of Light and Dark," which had won second prize in the group's annual competitions, the Lee Ettelson Composer Award. This 13-minute work for piano and percussion actually amounts to six movements, with the four movements of the title — meticulously balanced stretches of airy and thundering music — flanked with determined symmetry by two matching "frame" sections.

Explosion of Sound

Cox spoke of her desire to write a "fun" piece, and the music — skillfully played by pianist Ketty Nez and percussionist Arthur Storch — proved enjoyable even when its aims were rather limited. In the frame movements, the piano (with one of its notes turned metallic and rustly by the insertion of a dime in the strings) and the percussion plinked at one another benignly. Zippy glissandos swirled through the light movements, while the darker side culminated in a high-intensity explo-

sion of sound from both players.

Even more teeth-rattling was the concluding piece, Robert Greenberg's "It Don't Mean a Thing ...". This eight-minute drumfest, scored for a battery of percussion, certainly swings but otherwise has nothing to do with Duke Ellington. Instead, the music mimics the almost martial strains of Japanese taiko drumming, with its blend of ferocious ostinatos and jagged, artillery-like bursts of sound.

Rhythmic Palette

The effect was gripping, thanks to a sharp dramatic thrust and a rhythmic palette that proved interestingly subtle and varied. It also felt a little unclear of purpose, like most such cross-cultural adventuring. The piece got a wonderfully flamboyant account by the six-member San Francisco Conservatory Percussion Ensemble, conducted by Michal Lesham.

Before intermission, the Sonata No. 3 for Violin and Piano of Benjamin Lees was given a forthright performance by Daniel and Machiko Kobialka, for whom it was composed. This turned out to be a well-crafted, often lovely 18-minute score in one fairly sectional movement. The musical ideas are distinctively profiled, each developed with transparent clarity.

There is grace in the writing, and an appealing lack of fuss — though perhaps a lack of surprise, too — in the piece's overall formal workings. For better or worse, it seemed a genteel work, although that impression may have had something to do with the drums crashing around it. Cox's dime was left in the piano strings, lending Lees' music an improbably Cagian touch.