



## Review: Southwest Chamber Music and the Ascending Dragon Festival

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Southwest Chamber Music

[Southwest Chamber Music](#)'s Ascending Dragon Festival opened this weekend with a set of three pre-tour concerts Friday, Saturday, and Monday. I was able to hear the Monday, March 1, concert downtown at Zipper Hall, and left not only impressed by the ensemble and programming, but also enthused about the project generally and the fine events to come when the group returns from Vietnam next month.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was the teacher of Festival composers Nguyen Thien Dao (b. 1940) and Tôn Thất Tiết (b. 1933), and this acknowledgement on the program served as an important cultural statement as they honor their teacher.

Tôn Thất Tiết opened the program with the U.S. premiere of *Đôi* for bassoon and percussion. His music, like Messiaen's, was microtonal and filled with unorthodox multiphonic timbres and rhythmic tension. Allen Savedoff was unflappable in his ability to control his bassoon as it ascended with an extended tortuous climb from the lowest depths of the instrument to the stratospheric extremes few musicians dare to sound. Lynn Vartan was exceptionally sensitive as she melded timpani, marimba, vibraphone, and ceremonial Southeast Asian gongs. Her sounding of the Japanese temple bowl was ethereal and made for an effective ending.

Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" was worthy of its lofty title, and his brilliance was amplified because the Southwest Chamber Music players themselves were enchanted this evening. The opening glistened as Jim Foscia's emotive clarinet was enveloped by an evanescent harmonic "halo of trills" played beautifully by violinist Lorenz Gamma and cellist Peter Jacobson. Ming Tsu portayed Messiaen's self-described "harmonies of heaven" with her piano's "blue-orange chords." Foscia's extended unaccompanied solo in "Abîme des Oiseaux" was without equal. His control was astounding as he materialized the sound from literally nothing. The sound arose as if it were vaporous, and he could fade into nothingness just as convincingly. I have never heard such control; the effect was gripping. Jacobson was masterful in the fifth movement with his expansive, infinitely slow cello solo. He carefully crafted each note, and the audience was overtly moved by its largess.

At the end of time, the night ultimately belonged to Gamma as he guided us to the promised sound with his expansive violin solo. His slow ascent to the divine extreme was the high point of the evening. Gamma was amazing; my eyes teared, my breath stilled. The audience was briefly stunned. Bravo!

The final work on the program was Tôn Thất Tiết's "Les Jardins d'autre Monde," scored for a nine-piece instrumental ensemble. The piece was composed in memory of the city of Huế, the former capital of Vietnam, in which he writes about his strolls through the garden graves of the four emperors who reigned from the early 19th century until 1883, and how he imagined the music of their time. The poignancy of this work playing in Hanoi later this month was not lost in Artistic Director Jeff von der Schmidt's pre-concert talk.

The ensemble realized the mood and intentions of the composer, and the influence of Messiaen was easily discernable, especially in the parts of oboist Jonathan Davis and harpist Alison Bjorkedal. The range of sounds that these two produced, both orthodox and otherwise, was astounding.

Adding substantially to the experience is the fact that Zipper Hall is an extraordinary chamber music space. The advanced acoustical design is most effective, making it among the very best small ensemble performance venues in the city. You can find better ambiance, but there are no other acoustics like these.

Look for the return of Southwest Chamber Music and the Ascending Dragon Festival and Cultural Exchange in April.