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MUSIC REVIEW

## EAR Unit hears wind's howl in a fragile world

By Josef Woodard, Special to The Times

OUTSIDE REDCAT on Tuesday evening, political winds were blowing, on a midterm election night of more public interest than usual. Inside, it was politics as unusual for the California EAR Unit, whose program, dubbed "Target," seemed a timely nod to music built around themes of violence and unrest in the real, fragile world.

That's not to say that the EAR Unit, the West Coast's premier new music ensemble, has dogmatically kept real-world influences out of its cultural temple. But its concerts often veer more toward the poles of abstraction and escapism.

Still, history and current events may be working their way into artists' minds more than ever: All but one piece on this program were written post-9/11, and the exception was Ge Gan-ru's "Si (Memorial)," from 1990, a bold homage to the suffering surrounding the Tiananmen Square protest and carnage.

The centerpiece, Keeril Makan's "Target," was the climactic work of the night. It was also the one that made the strongest impression, partly thanks to the charismatic, multi-textured performance of mezzo-soprano Laurie Rubin. Blind since birth, Rubin seems to have an especially acute intuition about the power and subtleties of sound, and she was a compelling force at the center of the music. Based on texts by poet Jena Osman and from actual leaflets dropped on Afghanistan after 9/11, the piece reflects pain and also the absurdity of war in uniquely musical terms.

On more meditative ground, Ulrich Krieger's "before/Quake" creates a beguilingly airy atmosphere, one almost Morton Feldman-like with its distracted relationships between piano, cello and spare percussion. Percussionist Amy Knoles moved from tinkling coloristic cymbals to a rumbling bass drum as the other players fell into a more synchronized, repetitious phrase, triggering expectations of a more raucous "Quake" part of the title's equation. But rather than play up our seismic-phobia, the piece remains an understated and lustrous miniature.

Things immediately grew more maximal with Steven L. Ricks' exciting "Mild Violence," for the Unit's full sextet forces. Soft percussion is intruded upon by aggressive, tight bursts of ensemble action, setting up a program based on tart contrasts and tensions, including extreme dynamics and shifting moments of poise and pummeling. Another attractive feature is the music's palpable sense of wanting to fall into a steady rhythmic pattern but denying itself such easy gratification.

Mary Jane Leach's electro-acoustic "Gulf War Syndrone" is a friendly muddle of pulsating post-Minimal writing and found sounds, including President Bush's familiar twang. Although loosely related to Steve Reich's "Different Trains," this music is more given to aimless chatter.

By contrast, Hideko Kawamoto's intriguing electro-acoustic invention, "Burning," projected a spare, ascetic beauty, with vulnerability on the side. A quartet for piano, violin, cello and flute, the music juxtaposes disjointed sounds on tape with carefully disjointed connections between players, ultimately reorienting time and space. That phenomenon, after all, is the essential nature of music, and also of burning.