

# Los Angeles Times

## MUSIC REVIEW

### Live: Monday Evening Concerts, 'The Axe Manual'

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Thankfully, Monday power prevails in Los Angeles, if in leaner circumstances.

The Monday Evening Concerts series, dating back to the 1930s, has been a great American contemporary music source that nearly found itself homeless when its longtime host, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ended its tenure there two years ago.

But thanks to some heroic efforts, the MEC sound continues at the downtown Zipper Hall, a more suitable home, in fact. This Monday's edition, part of the second post-LACMA era season, confirmed the importance of the perpetuation of the series.

"The Axe Manual" was the title of both the concert and its centerpiece, a dazzling Harrison Birtwistle piece written for pianist Emmanuel Ax and percussionist Evelyn Glennie but performed with bracing vigor and precision in the concert's second half by Aleck Karis and Ross Karre.

In Birtwistle's engaging score -- a dialogue and a sparring game between the players -- a terse, dissonant-leaning musical language is wedded to a rhythmic impulsiveness.

Also after intermission, Birtwistle's brief "Lied," dedicated to piano great Alfred Brendel for his 75th birthday in 2006, received its U.S. premiere. The ever-sensitive Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick -- a busy player on the program -- joined pianist Liam Viney in this intense dialogue and study in musical figure and ground.

In the evening's first half, the spotlight went to the late Ralph Shapey, who died in 2002, and to the intriguing midcareer composer Gérard Pesson. Shapey's "Evocation No. 2," played by Viney, Duke-Kirkpatrick and a necessarily mobile percussionist, Amy Knoles, is a tough little wonder, with echoes of Messiaen, neurotic repetitions and fluid enigmas in its three varied movements.

Pesson's "Mes Beatitudes," for a piano quartet consisting of Viney, Duke-Kirkpatrick, violist Mark Menzies and violinist Movses Pogossian offering its West Coast premiere, proceeds and evolves mysteriously. What seems loose, unhinged activity, with airy high harmonics in the strings and scattershot piano material, fleetingly locks into structural connection points. Abstraction also gives way to wisps of Bruckner, Ravel and ghostly musical forms, but mostly the piece expresses introspective delicacy and lightness of being.

Those two pieces, along with Birtwistle's, persuasively conveyed the notion that new music can mix intellectuality with sonic puzzles, challenging the ear while soothing it in new ways. That may be a credo of MEC. Long may it concertize.