

**Saturday, May 31, 2014**  
**Concert Review: Playing at Statues**

**The New York Philharmonic makes *CONTACT!* at MoMA.**

by Paul J. Pelkonen



The Mario Merz sculpture *Ziffer im Wald* inspired a work on this week's *CONTACT!* program at the 2014 NY PHIL BIENNIAL. Photo from [salzburg.gv.at](http://salzburg.gv.at).

In the Alan Gilbert era at the New York Philharmonic, the *CONTACT!* series has provided a playground for musicians and enthusiasts of modern music alike to hear avant-garde compositions in a more intimate venue than the vast cavern of Avery Fisher Hall. On Thursday night, composer/conductor Matthias Pintscher led members of the orchestra in *Beyond Recall*, a late-night new music marathon at the Museum of Modern Art. This was the first of three *CONTACT!* concerts in the orchestra's ongoing *NY PHIL BIENNIAL*.

Like Mr. Pintscher himself, *Beyond Recall* is an Austrian import, originating as a Salzburg Festival commission challenging young composers to write short works based on modern sculptures found around that Alpine city. Of the twelve works commissioned for the original Salzburg concerts and premiered less than a year ago, Mr. Pintscher chose nine, assembling a two-and-a-half hour concert that challenged the horizons (and endurance) of the assembled.

The concert was presented on a purpose-built stage in the Agnes Gund Garden Lobby, with the musicians playing against a vast glass wall with the night-lit sculpture garden beyond. The show opened with Dai Fujikura's *silence seeking solace*. A small string ensemble played keening lines, providing an uneasy bed for the voice of soprano Jennifer Zetlan. The long lines and the setting of Harry Ross' text created a feeling of infinite space, obsessing on particular words and phrases in a meditation on the eternal feminine.

The next work, *Spirit of Alberti* by Bruno Mantovani is based on a sculpture by Marina Abramovic called *Spirit of Mozart*, a circle of metal chairs with one enormously high one in the center evoking the composer himself. Piano, kinetic percussion and the sound of buzzing insects recalled the feel of Salzburg on a searing summer day, the circular nature of Mantovani's music evoking the artist's suggestion that her sculpture was best experienced by sitting on it.

Olga Neuwirth's *Piazzi de Numeri* was a mathematician's dream, an ascending string of Fibonacci numbers (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13...) sung in German over the sound of a great, creaking rumbling clock by Ms. Zetlan. It was followed by *Adtende, ubi albescit veritas* a setting by the composer Michael Jarrell of Latin text from the Confessions of St. Augustine. Just as the Neuwirth work was a meditation on the power of ever-increasing numbers, this work studied the finite nature of time. Baritone Evan Hughes declaimed the text over a large orchestra.

After a short pause, the program resumed with a slate of more intimate works. *Caldera* by Johannes Maria Staud featured clarinet, piano and Ms. Zetlan, declaiming a nonsensical, polysyllabic text over Spartan accompaniment. But that was positively extravagant next to Mark Andre's *E2*, a minimalist walking journey for cello and bass that featured the two players tapping a steady rhythm for twelve minutes on strings, frog, neck, stem peg and the sides of their instrument. This work was an unlikely spotlight for new principal bassist Timothy Cobb, but he rose to the challenge.

The last three works were by composers who also happened to be attending Thursday night's performance. It was Edwin Wurm's set of large sculptures of gherkin pickles that inspired *In the Absence* by composer Nina Senk, set to a babbling, repeating text that included images of an exploding cucumber. Jay Schwartz' *M* reconstructed material from the Overture to *Le Nozze di Figaro* and the *Lacrymosa* from the *Requiem* into a radical new musical form. Sung by Mr. Hughes, this fragmented Latin text puzzled and intrigued the listener. These familiar themes were rebuilt into a heaven-storming wall of sound--impressive stuff.

Mr. Pintscher ended the concert with what appeared in the program to be a short opera by Vito Zuraj, a drama for two lovers on the verge of a really brutal breakup. And it must be said that Mr. Hughes and Ms. Zettan captured the drama and *angst* of ordinary people falling madly in love and then splitting in a firework display of spite and hatred before realizing at the end that love might prevail despite the pain inflicted. This compelling work featured the singers repeatedly overlapping each other and shouting each other down above the clamor of the orchestra--a raucous and brilliant close to this difficult but rewarding program.