

'Fireworks' concert is outside the box

By Rebecca C. Howard

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PARK CITY — Change is good, right? Well, it depends on your point of view. If you like things different for the sake of being different, then Thursday night's performance by the Fireworks Ensemble might have been the perfect concert.

The nine-person ensemble brought an extremely varied program that had two things in common — everything was dance music, and everything was reinterpreted by the group. So if it was originally electronic music, Fireworks performed it on acoustic instruments. If it was originally acoustic, Fireworks went electronic.

The opening number, for example, was Strauss' "Thunder and Lightning" polka, with electric bass, electric guitar, amped drums and the rest of the acoustic ensemble (piano, violin, cello, soprano saxophone, flute). Later, part of a Haydn quartet was played with similar instrumentation — plus marimba. Interesting? Absolutely. Did it work? Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

The two aforementioned pieces get a thumbs down. The "thunder" passages in the polka were loud, jarring and sounded out of context from the rest of the arrangement. This principle generally applied to everything that didn't work; it didn't sound organic to the music or arrangement and merely drew attention to itself for being different, which distracted from the arrangement. You can try anchovies on chocolate cake; it'll be different but not necessarily better. Besides, does Copland's "Hoe Down" really need a remix?

When it did work, however — wow. Fireworks played a Nordic suite that featured each player individually, and it was exquisite. The flute multiphonics (the flutist was singing while playing) added a beautiful, almost haunting feel to "Tveitanvise," and the prepared piano with the guitar gave "Kjoeringkjegla" an exotic flavor. Adding two kazooes to the Renaissance-era "Istampita Palamento" was a natural, and didn't even sound like an "update" because the crumhorn already sounds so much like a kazoo. The group also played some rock music. AFX's "Analogue Bubblebath," originally electronic, here turned acoustic (thumbs up). New Order's "Blue Monday," which was popular in the 1980s. (Thumbs down; the repetitive bass and drum riffs drowned out all the interesting stuff going on with the other instruments.) The audience didn't seem to mind and was especially enthusiastic about the re-interpretation of the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive" and Duke Ellington's "Don't Get Around Much Anymore." Whatever your opinion of the remixes, they were anything but boring. And the players are skillful, talented and energetic.

Also, the Fireworks Ensemble gets a very enthusiastic thumbs up for being so creative and original. Love it or hate it, it's healthy to think outside the box and to bring the audience along for the ride. With music where different interpretations usually mean one person plays the third D-flat a little bit louder and a little bit longer than the next person, it's refreshing to hear some truly original thinking. And it's healthy to challenge accepted, established notions of the way art should be. And these players do just that.