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Portland Chamber Music Festival showcases a political work, of sorts

Andy Vores' 'Dark Days,' which he wrote in response to the presidential election, hits some wrong notes deliberately.

BY **ALLAN KOZINN**

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“I don’t want to say that it’s about anything,” the composer [Andy Vores](#) said of his new work for flute and string quartet, which was about to have its world premiere. “But it’s a topical piece, and its title is ‘Dark Days.’ ” He noted, however, that the movement titles were quotations from Shakespeare’s “Richard III” – among them, “Conscience is but a word that cowards use,” and “Who is so gross that cannot see this palpable device?”

By then, Vores had already explained that he had composed the piece as a way of working through some disheartening news, and he described the musical action in terms that were as evocative as the music itself: The strings have music that strains to keep together, while in each movement the flute interjects figures that are meant to be

pointless and barely coherent.

CONCERT REVIEW

WHAT: Variations on Light

WHERE: SPACE Gallery, Portland

REVIEWED: Monday, Jan. 9



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Vores' work opened "Variations on Light," the new-music program that the [Portland Chamber Music Festival](#) presented at SPACE Gallery on Monday evening.

Under other circumstances, his introduction might have been a distraction, leading listeners to obsess about the work's subject, rather than taking it in. But this was not much of a puzzler; the only question – whether it is the composer's response to Brexit

(Vores was born in Wales but has lived in the United States since 1987), the election of Donald Trump, or both – is answered on the composer's web page: It was the election.

Whether the piece works as social commentary hangs on, of all things, the uselessness of the flute line, and in that sense, Vores may have failed as a commentator by succeeding as a composer. Though a bit repetitive, and neither as pointed nor as complex as the string writing, the flute line was not remotely as incoherent as the speeches it was modeled on, or for that matter, as empty as the solo lines in other flute classics (for example, the virtuoso snoozers of Franz and Karl Doppler, the 19th century flutist-composer siblings).

Moreover, flutist [Sarah Brady](#), alternating on flute and bass flute, played Vores' music with the beauty of tone she typically brings to her work. Granted, the flute line does have a disruptive effect. In the first of the four movements, it interrupts the vigorous quartet writing that opens the piece, and at one point, it evokes the sound of a lowing cow. In the second movement, its chromatic line causes the disintegration of an already idiosyncratic waltz.

The third movement is out of control from the start; it begins with music that recalls the coda of the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever," and grows increasingly turbulent. But Vores provides an optimistic finale, in which the strings, along with the flute, gradually return to the energy and cohesiveness of the work's opening pages. That completion of the thematic circle, a standard compositional technique, may give this score life beyond its topicality. But it makes Vores' political point oddly

ambiguous.

The Vores work shared the first half of the program with “Spell” (2009), a lyrical fantasy for flute and string trio by [Mark Berger](#), who was also the violist in the ensemble (and also in the Lydian String Quartet). Berger cast the flute as a conjurer – hence the work’s title – and gave it a gracefully ornamented line that is often mirrored, and occasionally countered, in the string writing.

You could argue whether [Amy Beach’s](#) century-old Theme and Variations, for flute and string quartet, belongs on a new-music program, but the musicians brought warmth and suppleness to its scampering figures, brief solo passages, and lush Romantic textures. Opening the concert’s second half, it was a palate cleanser of sorts, and if it was also a late-Romantic interloper, it earned its welcome as a reminder that Beach’s neglected works are worth exploring, however belatedly.

[Andrew Norman’s](#) “Light Screens” (2002), for flute and string trio, closed the program with a burst of irresistible energy and thematic shapeliness.

The players, besides Brady and Berger, were violinists Gabriela Diaz and Jennifer Elowitch, and cellist Joshua Gordon (also on loan from the Lydian String Quartet), who proved to be a consistently cohesive ensemble.

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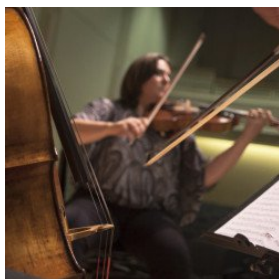
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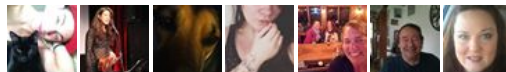
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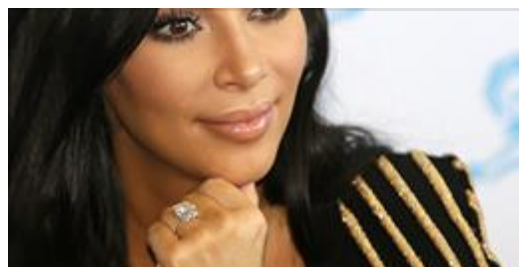
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