

### **MATA Festival: Where Failure and Success Mingle Happily**

By Daniel Stephen Johnson, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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The MATA Festival is a special treat for new-music connoisseurs: not so many big names, but many, many big discoveries. MATA commissions relative unknowns—unknown Stateside, at least—and distills thousands upon thousands of unsolicited submissions into a week of truly diverse programming from an international array of composers.

The 2016 MATA Festival's third night, whimsically titled "Chaos Terrain and Lines of Fortune" and presented at Brooklyn's small, acoustically pristine National Sawdust, also marked the first American performance by Strasbourg's Ensemble Linea (Jean-Philippe Wurtz, conductor), but--on the basis of this appearance—certainly not the last. Du Yun, whose own confrontational opera *Angel's Bone* premiered at the [Prototype Festival](#) in January, served again as artistic director this year, and to her great credit the work she curated shared little of her style, but somehow, all of her attitude. MATA assembled a posse of composers whose only common characteristics seemed to be intense emotional expression and a defiant pursuit of the new.



*Strasbourg's Linea Ensemble*

Many of these pieces were, in the best possible way, like a composition professor's nightmare, rejecting conventional, teachable notions of harmony, form, and development in favor of a restless experimentalism. In off-the-cuff composer interviews conducted before each piece by MATA Executive Director Todd Tarantino, a few of the composers cited the so-called New York School of the mid- 20th-century American avant-garde (Cage, Feldman, et al) rather than academic, classical, or vernacular influences.

Michelle Agnes Magalhaes, of Brazil, presented the U.S. premiere of *Mobile*, a solo piece composed for the John Cage centennial in 2012, exploiting piano preparations similar to those prescribed for his *Sonatas and Interludes*. But the sounds she created were entirely her own, as pianist Claudia Chan not only played prepared and unprepared notes from the keyboard but also reached into the piano to beat and stroke the strings directly, and even plucked the objects wedged between them to create delightful new sonorities as they snapped and vibrated against

the strings on either side. And unlike Cage, whose patient forms methodically explored the permutations of his gamut of sounds, Magalhaes was more interested in creating a lively, layered dialogue among the sounds.

American composer Scott Wollschleger's *America*, on the other hand, another unaccompanied work, grew as much out of the forms invented by Cage, Feldman, and their circle as from the New York School's timbral explorations, as cellist Johannes Burghoff played through a seemingly arbitrary series of repetitive cells, often involving quiet harmonics and mostly eschewing tonal implications. The piece took flight occasionally; when the material in a particular cell was especially eloquent, it had the appeal of a rock riff. Otherwise it was not particularly successful.

Failure, however unfortunate a byproduct of experimentation, is also integral to experimentation and often just as fascinating as success. If some of the pieces missed their targets, it was because the exciting new forms they attempted were risky and bold. Iranian composer Arash Yazdani's *Demodulation*, receiving its American premiere, added oboist Stuart Brezczinski to the Linea lineup to explore extremely high pitches in microtonal clusters, while *yES I dOESN'T* by Turkish composer Utku Asuroglu ended the concert with one extended, furiously busy paroxysm of dissonance and noise. The ensemble was amplified, and in a dramatic gesture, live handheld microphones were actually scraped lengthwise down the piano strings. Just prior to Auroglu's contribution, Israeli Yair Klartag's *There's no lack of void* was far quieter, but just as busy, the individual instruments bustling with seemingly futile activity, which periodically coalesced into ensemble passages of unexpected emotional weight and profundity.

The program was so risky, in fact, that the most conventional piece managed to seem exciting and different simply by virtue of its close contact with the Western classical tradition. Chinese composer Weijun Chen's highly polished *Dancer*, a MATA commission, stood out for the unmistakably Romantic effect of its tonal harmonies and the slow-fast-slow contrast of its form, even though its finely detailed textures often mimicked the chaos of improvisation and indeterminacy. Its overt lyricism also presented a standard by which to evaluate the performers: Marco Fusi's exposed violin playing suddenly seemed wobbly and tentative, compared to the precision and elegance of Burghoff's restrained but expressive cello.

The most satisfying experiment of the evening was Italian composer Zeno Baldi's *Mimo*, for whose American premiere the ensemble prepared not only the piano strings, but the violin, viola, and cello strings as well. They were muted with bits of a corklike substance placed on the fingerboard side of the bridge, creating a muffled, percussive sound when the strings were plucked. Meanwhile, clarinetist Andrea Nagy was required to play a *pianississimo* solo on bicycle horn. All of these funny little tricks blended into sonorities so luscious, so novel, and so brilliantly unified that Baldi's work was a highlight among all these thoughtful and inventive composers. American ensembles should be so generous—and American audiences, so fortunate—as to take another trip to his strange new sound-world in the near future.