

New Haven Register

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'New Music' finale was climactic

By Courtenay V. Cauble

NEW HAVEN — New Music New Haven's program in Sprague Hall Thursday evening was not only the final one for this season, but also what series Music Director Jacob Druckman aptly called the climactic one.

The evening held superior performances of two works by guest composer Francis Thorne and the premiere of an impressive opera by Jeremy Beck, a gifted young composer at the Yale School of Music.

Thorne, who has distinguished himself as a composer during the 50 years since graduating from Yale, couldn't have wished for better readings of either his "Rhapsodic Variations No. 3" or his "Six Set Pieces," the former played by oboist Kevin Vigneau and the Cassatt String Quartet and the latter by a splendid thirteen-piece ensemble led by Kaaren Gorden.

Reflecting both Thorne's sense of humor and his involvement with jazz and serialism, the "Six Set Pieces," are well put-together musical sketches that include "jam-session" vignettes, studies in mood contrasts and rhythmic accents, a miniature chorale prelude, and a spoof-like collage of classical

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theme quotations.

"Rhapsodic" in both the intensity of its lyric expressiveness and its freedom of movement through a variety of moods and performance techniques, the piece is beautiful, communicative music.

Beck's opera "The Highway" (1992) was equally fine. It was the happy combination of Beck's savvy libretto, freely derived from O'Henry's 1902 short story "Roads of Destiny," and Beck's engaging score that prompted the cast to move away from the intended "concert version" and to act out their story most persuasively. The uniformly excellent cast featured tenor Douglas Purcell, baritones Michael Chioldi and Alan Arak, soprano Cynthia Zielski, and mezzo-soprano Mary Phillips. Thomas Duffy conducted the orchestra.

Beck's choice of a story with both psycho-dramatic impact and easily defined characters was apt for opera, his handling of dramatic relationships and superimposed time was masterful, and his skillfully crafted music had both forward thrust and high points.