Ears Embig: Day 1

It was a low key beginning to my festival, but no less wondrous for that. A short summary…

Began my festival with Yarn/Wire, a 2 piano/2 percussion quartet from NY that presented a program of works by Alvin Lucier, Andrew McIntosh, and Misato Mochizuki. It was glorious. I took only one photo all evening, the one up top. It's a lame attempt at catching the sunset refracted through the stained glass of St. John's Cathedral, but I looked up and realized that sound and light had merged into a perfect compliment. Yarn/Wire might not look like a "band" in the popular vein, but after 18 years these four musicians have established an uncanny group awareness. They work together like a Swiss watch.

The Lucier piece began with a single note of a vibraphone, repeated at long intervals. Then a member came out carrying a snare drum tuned to resonate to the vibes note. She wandered around the space as another member with a snare came walking in from the far side, followed by another from behind. The snares moved around the space for around ten minutes as the vibes began to bend the note slightly flat then back to pitch. It was ten minutes of immersive listening, a glorious launch to the Embiggening.

The McIntosh piece began with tubular bells and high pitch piano clusters. Then things started going every which way: gongs and bells and cymbals for days, occasional thunder rumbles of low tone piano fist pounding. (Is the piano a

percussion intrument? Fkng A right it is.) There was evident shape to it all, and there were several spots where one could imagine the piece had ended. Unfortunately, too many in the audience – primed to compete in the next-show sprint – took it as a cue to head for the exits.

The ensemble was focused and unperturbed, but this happened several times during the 30-minute piece; when the McIntosh ended there was a standing ovation and a mad rush, though the groups first notes of the Mochizuki convinced a few to sit back down. The ensemble could have managed expectations better but had decided on zero introductions. Still, there was a frigging drum set at the front of the stage that had not yet been used, and like Chekov's gun, the show is not over til the drum kit is fired.

And oh, how it was fired. Sae Hashimoto began with slightly off kilter slow roll, joined soon by Greenberg. Things wavered in and out of phase as it built towards a slamming crescendo, joined at last by pianists Laura Barger and Julia Den Boer on cymbal blasts until a sudden silence. The audience held this for a brief moment and erupted.

I scampered to the Frisell Trio/Knoxville Symphony show at the Civic Auditorium. There were moments, but I really wanted to like it more than I did. The Civic Center is one of the farthest-flung venues, so a little hard to get to, and it is a classic of the 70s era multi-purpose venue. Even still, the acoustics were far more enjoyable than I would have expected, and the Symphony is a fine sounding ensemble. But the marriage of symphony and improvising trio was neither feast nor fowl to my ears, so I set out on the next long walk. Plenty more Frisell throughout (see what I did there?) the weekend.

I made it to the Standard while the Bill Orcutt Guitar Quartet was sound checking and heard about 15 minutes of them getting ready. The prospect of massive sonic assault and standing for another hour was too much for my lameoid self, so I booked it

over to The Point (another new venue, and a tad far flung) to catch the beginning of My Brightest Diamond. Boy, am I glad I did.

(And yeah, I'm certain the Orcutt was massive and I'm crazy to miss, etc. That's Big Ears for ya.)

Shara Nova delivered an utterly engaging performance, a set of old and new MBD tunes and one from The Blue Hour. I love this woman's voice but I had never experienced her as an entertainer. Along with the music, her set balanced theater, prop comedy, standup comedy, dance, and crowd participation. She entered from the rear of the church wearing a Britney Spears mask and carrying a trunk filled with costume changes and various accessories. Then she delivered her 'Letter to Britney' from her opera *You Us We All* followed by a formal introduction to the evening's "karaoke" performance that invoked her grandfather, born about 30 miles southwest of here in Mt. Vernon, Tennessee. Bringing at all around, the closing number was her 'Letter to Beyonce', and I swear that no matter how many times I hear it, the typewriter clackety clack with the tartly sung "Yours" to end these letters will never stop being funny.

How good was it? Stanwyck, who is pretty hard to impress, leaned over about ten minutes in and said, "Oh my god, I looooove her" and declined any further concerts for the night. It was how she wanted her day to end, Stanwyck decreed. Nuff said.

I trekked back to St. John's for Kali Malones organ recital. It was standing room only, but I found a sliver of a pew for my skinny ass and settled in for enveloping shimmer. She was joined by another pair of hands (connected to a bady, natch) as we floated on looooong held chords. The lowest notes were especially physical. Even where the pieces had obvious ending points, there was very little audience churn during the breaks.

Then a quick dash to the Bijou for Vijay Iyer Trio, and wow, what a good move. Tyshawn Sorey's drum kit was a basic as it gets: snare, kick, hi hat, and ride cymbal. And he still got more color and shape and tone out of it than drummers buried in a mountain of gear. Bassist Linda May Han Oh is an unstoppable force and Iyer showed why he sits among the top of the current pianist crowd. Stunning conversation and flow, these three were scary how quickly and seamlessly they caught each others' shifts and push/pull gestures. Group improvisation really does not get any better than this.

Solid hard sleep after that, the kind you get when the deepest part of your soul is fully fed.