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MUSIC REVIEW | POUL RUDERS

Appreciating the Peace by Declaring a Bit of War

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI
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Even when exposed to painfully loud music at a classical concert, there is something ungracious about covering your ears to protect your hearing. It's just not proper protocol.

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Joe Kohen for The New York Times
 David Starobin, left, and Poul Ruders on Thursday evening.

But on Thursday night at Scandinavia House, for a concert celebrating the 60th birthday of Poul Ruders, Denmark's leading composer, Mr. Ruders invited audience members to stick their fingers in their ears during "Regime," his 1984 work for three percussionists.

"'Regime' is loud," he warned. He was right. Though a nifty piece, "Regime" was very loud. For long stretches after Mr.

Ruders's prompting, I covered my ears. I was not alone.

As Mr. Ruders explained in a talk with the guitarist David Starobin, an organizer of this birthday concert, co-sponsored by Scandinavia House and Bridge Records, "Regime" was commissioned for a festival in Britain whose theme was world peace. Rather than write some "soft, bleeding-heart thing," Mr. Ruders said, he composed a piece in which the audience is placed against the wall and assaulted with sound, victims of sonic attack. Listeners should be left begging for peace and realizing what a precious thing it is.

Still, as played here by Daniel Druckman, Tomoya Aomori and Kyle Brightwell, three resourceful musicians from the Juilliard Percussion Ensemble, this nine-minute piece exuded wild invention and rhythmic intricacy. It was not pounding drums and clanking metal that produced the loudest sounds, but the whistles blown by the players in complex, coordinated patterns.

At one point, as the musicians produced gently percolating rhythms from an array of wooden blocks, gongs, drums and more, they emitted a simultaneous barrage of shrill whistles. It sounded as if a police squad were breaking up a Javanese gamelan jam session that had gotten out of hand.

That Mr. Ruders can do delicacy as well as onslaught was vividly demonstrated by two other works, both in premiere performances. "Pages I-X" for solo guitar, played by Mr. Starobin, is a set of 10 elusive and quirky miniatures.

"New Rochelle Suite," for the unlikely duo of guitar and percussion, enabled Mr. Starobin's guitar to hold its own against Mr. Druckman's percussion playing through subdued music of transparent textures. Fanciful lines and bursts of chords for the guitar are lucidly set against rapping snare drums, shaky tambourines and such.

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The program ended with a 30-minute chamber work that revealed the full depth of Mr. Ruders's originality. "Serenade on the Shores of the Cosmic Ocean" (2004), inspired by Carl Sagan's book "Cosmos," by turns contemplative, restless and frenetic, is ingeniously scored for accordion and string quartet. Like string instruments, the accordion can produce tremolos, glissandos and swells, but of a strikingly different quality.

And yet sometimes it was hard to tell whether some ravishing high melodic line was coming from violin harmonics or from the eerie, focused high reaches of the accordion. Similarly, the huffing and puffing of the accordion blended with gutsy outbursts of the lower strings.

The piece received a riveting performance by the brilliant accordionist Mikko Luoma and the accomplished iO String Quartet, to conclude this concert on the eve of Mr. Ruders's actual birthday.

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