

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

## Review: Project BLANK's sprawling 'Space Travel' is detailed, moving, even delicious



Project BLANK's "The Tragedies of Space Travel" event featured (left to right) violinist Batya MacAdam-Somer, pianist Brendan Nguyen, cellist Peter Ko and clarinetist Peter Dayeh. They are seen here in rehearsing for the concert. (Courtesy of Project BLANK)

Inspired by Messiaen's "Quartet for the end of Time," the piece mixes new, old, science fiction and the Vietnamese refugee experience

By **Luke Schulze**

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There is a term that Richard Wagner used to describe his operas that we have borrowed: "Gesamtkunstwerk," or "total art-work," describes an aesthetic experience that brings

together all our senses in a totalizing, all-encompassing piece of art.

While Logan Heights might be an unlikely place to find Wagner's ideas fleshed out, Project BLANK's recent theater and music production of "The Tragedies of Space Travel," at Bread & Salt, is a fabric of sounds, flavors, images and layers of meaning as immersive and multisensory as anything you'd find at Bayreuth.

"The Tragedies of Space Travel" — which was presented Friday through Sunday — is a colossal thing: sprawling, detailed, moving, even delicious. The production is largely the brainchild of Brendan Nguyen, an active pianist, artist, and co-founder of the concert and production series Project BLANK. Nguyen is joined here by a host of artists and specialists, including playwright Carolina Do; technical director Joe Cantrell; visual artist Ash Capachione; director Leslie Ann Leythem; sound designer Joe Mariglio; violinist Batya MacAdam-Somer; cellist Peter Ko; and clarinetist Peter Dayeh.

Nguyen's work is scaffolded around, and subsumes, a performance of Olivier Messiaen's "Quatour pour la fin du Temps," or "Quartet for the end of Time." Composed in 1940 while Messiaen was confined in a German prisoner-of-war camp and inspired by the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, Messiaen's quartet is made up of eight movements for piano, clarinet, violin, and piano (the instruments available to Messiaen during his internment, played by his prison-mates).

By itself, the quartet is daunting and ecstatic — perhaps the most famous example of the technical and devotional scope of Messiaen's music. Messiaen is a composer who can do just about anything, style-wise. Moments of crushing atonal brutality are followed by torch-song melodies, pastoral chords, and bird-songs with surprising clarity, authenticity, and purpose. The performance took place in multiple locations, along with video montages of original images and footage of recent wartime events.

In the narrative, the audience is part of the story. Believing that they are to hear a performance of Messiaen's piece, the concert-goers are met by alien travelers, who have

left their own world fleeing wars and destruction. Our visitors have learned something of modern human atrocities by (somehow) hearing recordings of Messiaen's piece. Their plan, which they reveal only later, is to lull the audience (and humanity) into a false sense of safety by offering food (Vietnamese chicken and fried rolls) and stories from their own world, then moving to colonize Earth.

That's one plot layer. On another, the production is "an exploration of second-generation Vietnamese experience and the echoing ramifications of violence, displacement, and war. It employs "alien invasion sci-fi tropes and otherworldly soundscapes as allegory for the perception of displaced refugees and immigrants." In addition, subsidiary themes emerge: environmental awareness, gender identity, the ongoing battle between the rich and powerful and the working class they exploit, and Nguyen and Do's biographies as first-gen children in America.

With such a diverse conglomerate of sources and intentions, "Tragedies" is kind of a mess — a campy, touching, wonderful, mess. A bizarre narrative that in another setting might seem impossible, here simply works.

Why? Well, the space helped: Bread & Salt is industrial and disarming, the perfect neighborhood venue to stage such a show. Further, the background and varied landscape of Messiaen's music help it to accept a context transplant like few other works might.

Also, the musicianship of Nguyen and company was extraordinary. From Peter Dayeh's tone and timbral dexterity in the solo clarinet incantation "The Abyss of Birds" to the unbroken focus of Peter Ko's cello in "Praise to the Eternity of Jesus," the performances were fierce and committed; violinist Batya MacAdam-Somer led the group through the "Dance of Fury for the Seven Trumpets," a stunning group unison in rushing asymmetrical rhythms. Nguyen is himself a gifted and exciting pianist.

Finally, though, it may have been the personal values, shared by the creators and worn utterly on the sleeve, that animate this production, among them a concern for our world, the idea of displacement, and a sense of connection with, and tribute to, one's family history — that proved so winning.

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