

CLASSICAL MUSIC

# Review: Project BLANK offers thought-provoking music, art installations at St. Paul's



Members of the New Verbal Workshop sing Dom Cooper's "Labyrinthine" while walking the spiral floor at St. Paul's Cathedral as part of Project BLANK's "Working Title" event on Jan. 13, 2024. (Courtesy of Christian Hertzog)

## San Diego New Verbal Workshop walks and sings the Great Hall's labyrinth and Peter Ablinger contemplates falling water drops

By Christian Hertzog

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Last weekend, St. Paul's Cathedral was transformed into a gallery and performance space by Project BLANK.

From Thursday through Sunday evenings, two dozen American and Mexican artists and performers exhibited installations and performance art under the curation of Diana Benavidez.

Each night featured different musical performances programmed by Project BLANK artistic director, Leslie Ann Leytham. We attended the second set on Friday, and both Saturday sets.

A bilingual program provided information about performers, but precious little about the compositions. Trumpeter David Aguila was listed as playing "Ghost Tones" by Nasim Khorassani and himself, which I later discovered was not a collaboration but two distinct works.

"Weiss/weisslich 31e" by Peter Ablinger and "Aus den Visionen der Hildegard von Bingen" by Sofia Gubaidulina could have benefited from German translations of their titles ("White/whitish" and "From the Visions of Hildegard of Bingen," respectively), as well as an English translation of Hildegard's texts.

It seemed odd that the installations had artist statements in English and Spanish, but there was no context provided for most of the musical performances. The one exception was Saturday's closing piece, "Labyrinthine," by Dom Cooper, which was accompanied by a maze-like layout of texts about and illustrations of labyrinths.

It was performed in the Great Hall of St. Paul's, which has a labyrinth on its floor.

One by one, seven singers from the San Diego New Verbal Workshop gradually travelled the labyrinth, each slowly repeating a single textless tone. The audience was seated around the performers, and as they approached or receded, it brought different pitches of the seven-part harmony to the fore.

Hearing this was an analog to walking the labyrinth: there were small changes within an overall form that did not change. Halfway through the work, all seven vocalists reached the center, and then slowly began retracing their paths. As each exited the labyrinth, they stopped singing. It was a lovely sonic and visual meditation.

Gubaidulina's setting of Hildegard's contemplation of God contrasted the fervent assertion of Leslie Ann Leytham's mezzo-soprano voice with the squeals and rumblings of Matthew Kline's double bass. In 2022 the 90-year-old composer noted that "I have spent my life trying to create a kind of cathedral of sound." Leytham and Kline's performance in an actual cathedral was a compelling realization of Gubaidulina's spiritualism.



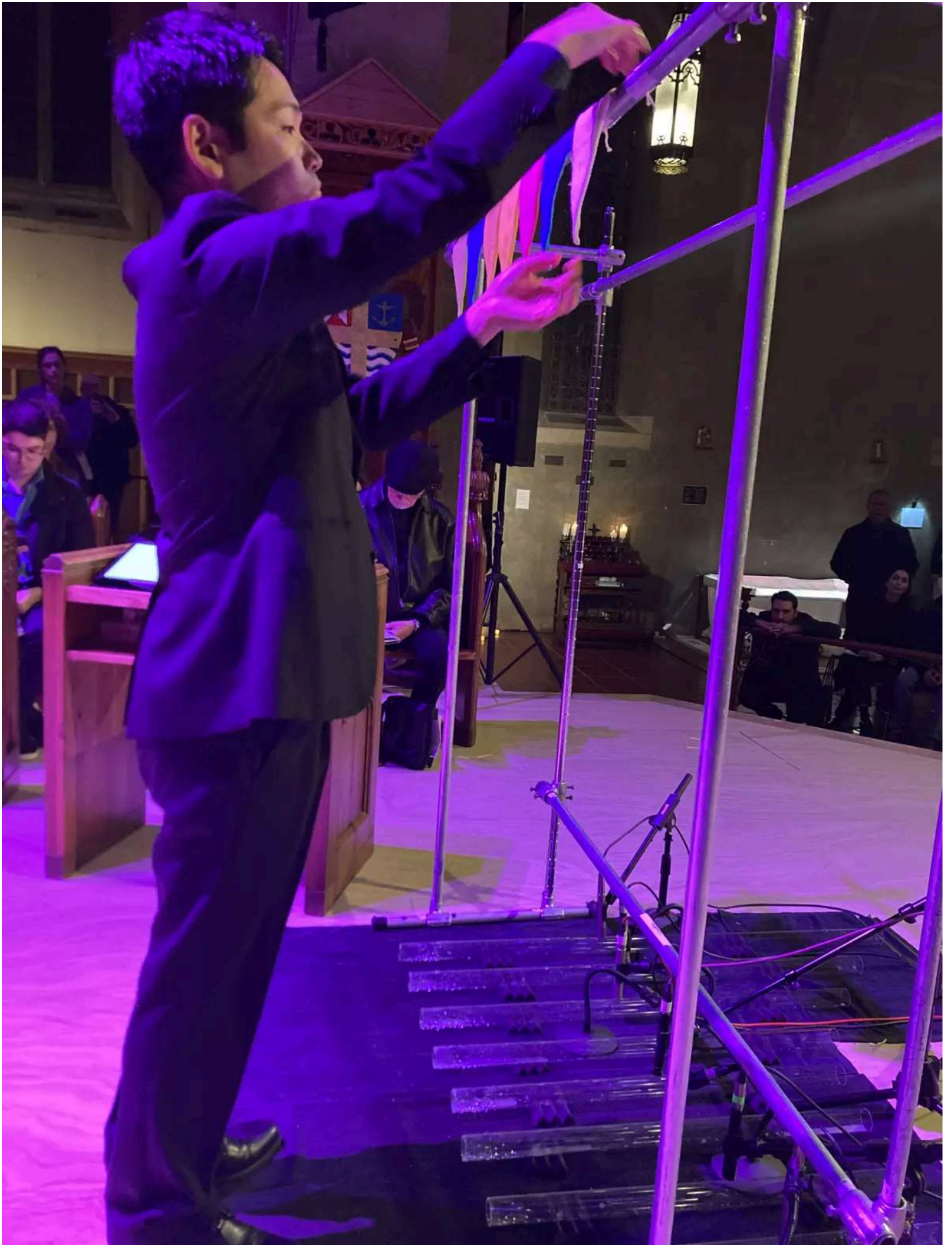
**Peter Ablinger: Weiss/Weisslich 31e**  
Membrane, percussionist Adam  
Weisman

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Austrian composer Peter Ablinger pushes the boundaries of what constitutes music and how we perceive it. In his "Weiss/weisslich" series of works (currently numbering over 44), Ablinger delves into "the difference between white and the perception of white, between a sound and listening to this sound."

Percussionists usually make music by striking instruments. In “Weiss/Weisslich 31e,” soloist Kosuke Matsuda did not strike anything, but rather hung up water-soaked cloths which dripped onto 8 differently pitched glass tubes.



Percussionist Kosuke Matsuda performs Peter Ablinger's "Weiss/Weisslich 31e" during a Project BLANK concert at St. Paul's Cathedral in San Diego on Jan. 13, 2024. (Courtesy of Christian Hertzog)

The rhythms of the dripping slowed down, the overall textures built up to 8 pitches or subtracted down to one. Ablinger's score specifies the order in which the tubes are activated. Matsuda oversaw this with solemnity and an appropriate sense of timing.

Violinist Jesus Cervantes improvised slow modal melodies over gently oscillating electronic sounds as dancer Odessa Uno slowly rose from a loose fetal position on the floor to a swirling, fluid crouch.



Trumpeter David Aguila performs sonic improvisation at Project BLANK concerts at St. Paul's Cathedral in San Diego on Jan. 12, 2024. (Courtesy of Christian Hertzog)

For Khorassani's "Ghost Tones," David Aguila eerily sounded his trumpet with breath sounds while wearing an eyeless black balaclava. For his own electronic improvisation, he employed two bells on one trumpet, and in both works his sonic explorations invoked UC San Diego trumpeter Edwin Harkins.

In Natalia Merlano Gomez's vocal improvisations over electronics, the spirit of composer Joan La Barbara — once a dynamic Southern Californian presence — seemed to inhabit St. Paul's.



Natalia Merlano Gomez performs improvisational vocals over electronics at a Project BLANK concert at St. Paul's Cathedral in San Diego on Jan. 12, 2024. (Courtesy of Christian Hertzog)



Hertzog is a freelance writer.