

# Music review: *Pandaemonium* at Other Minds Festival 15

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[Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic](#)

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Other Minds Festival

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"Any sufficiently advanced technology," Arthur C. Clarke famously wrote, "is indistinguishable from magic." To which many observers might add, *black* magic.

The mixture of excitement and dread that attends any huge technological shift lies at the heart of "Pandaemonium," an exuberantly witty and inventive new piece by composer Carla Kihlstedt that had its world premiere Saturday night in Kanbar Hall at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center. Although the explicit references are from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the work's contemporary relevance is too obvious to miss.

"Pandaemonium" was a splendid conclusion to three nights' worth of eclectic concerts as part of the 15th annual Other Minds Festival. Written for the Rova Saxophone Quartet and two readers, it combines excerpts from diaries, letters and newspaper stories with

unpredictable musical commentary - some carefully structured, some freely improvised - that draws on the quartet's distinctive style.

The spoken texts, delivered with plummy verve by Matthias Bossi (Kihlstedt's husband) and Joan Mankin, would have been fascinating enough in their own right. In their vivid accounts of first-time encounters with new machinery, you can hear the unnerving novelty of such developments as the hot-air balloon, central heating, high-speed printing and the railroad ("The Devil, if he traveled, would go by train").

But Kihlstedt and Rova have fleshed out these snippets with music of suitable intensity and power - ominous, densely packed harmonies; quasi-mechanical counterpoint; or flailing, unpredictable improvisations. The result is both dramatic and ironically reflective at once.

Sometimes the interaction between music and text amounts to jocose leg-pulling. A vignette about the childhood of Isaac Newton, who forsook the company of other boys to build elaborate mouse-powered windmills, is accompanied by a motoric click. When a letter describes central heating as producing "an artificial spring, summer or winter," the musicians whip out tiny boom boxes playing tinny, distorted versions of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons."

But other segments reach far to conjure up the demonic power of the Industrial Revolution. Descriptions of textile mills - and the noise and air pollution they created - are joined with turbulent and darkly beautiful writing for the four saxophones.

In a deft final touch, the piece ends with all four musicians switching to elemental pitch pipes for a few limpid harmonies - as if to withdraw to a simpler world in which even the saxophone is a diabolical machine.

Saturday's program began with another world premiere, a lovely piece of jazz-chamber fusion by guitarist-composer Gyan Riley titled "When Heron Sings Blue." Scored for the composer's own trio - which includes violinist Timb Harris and drummer Scott Amendola - along with electric bassist Michael Manring, the piece unfolds in three movements of sharply differing character.

The opening movement, driven forward by long, spidery melodic lines, gives way to a meditative ballad; the finale, a symmetrical triptych in itself, takes its energy from irregular meter (a 5 1/2-beat cycle) and the interactions between Riley and Manring. The cumulative effect is virtuosic and often arrestingly beautiful.

Also on the program was Tom Johnson, whose finest works (including "Failing" and "The Four Note Opera") combine high concept with dramatic spark.

Unfortunately, he was represented by two dreary pieces ("Combinations" and "Eggs and Baskets") that substituted number theory for artistry. One movement of "Combinations"

was both austere and numbingly repetitive, as though Anton Webern were attempting an ill-natured parody of Philip Glass.

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## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## MUSIC REVIEW

## Witty 'Pandaemonium' wraps up Other Minds

By Joshua Kosman  
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

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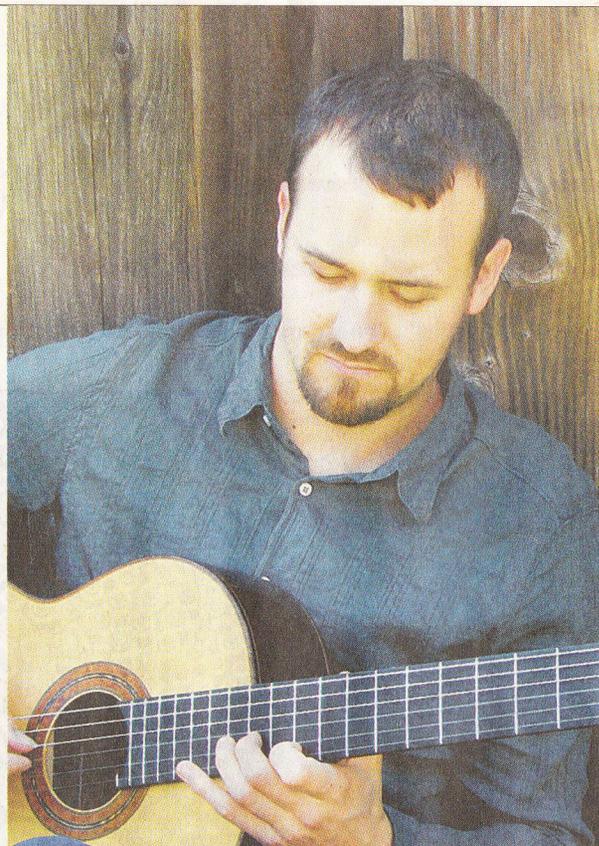
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Rya Kihlstedt

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