The growth of Santa Monica's ambitious Jacaranda Music series in just over four years of existence has been staggering. The series, under the direction of Patrick Scott and Mark Alan Hilt, has become a major player in presenting 20th- and 21st-century art music in L.A., and if there was any question still remaining about that fact, all one had to do was look around the room at the faces in the nearly capacity crowd at Santa Monica's First Presbyterian Church this past Saturday night. (One wonders how much longer they'll be able to continue in this space given the ever increasing size of their audiences.)

In addition to the concert, entitled "Ring Around the Moon," the evening also marked the annual awarding of the group's Forte Awards honoring individuals who have championed 20th-century music in L.A. Both of this year's recipients, violinist Movses Pogossian and L.A. Philharmonic president Deborah Borda, were in attendance Saturday, a testament to Jacaranda's reach and importance in the music community here.

Of course, all this seems obvious considering the quality and content of the show performed that evening, which lived up to the series' high standards. The pieces all spoke to a nocturnal world and one often marked with a certain spirituality. It was
music for the darkest days of the year with a cold and sometimes sparse beauty. Kaija Saariaho's trio for piano, cello, and viola Je sens un deuxieme coeur started things off. These brief five movements grew out of Saariaho's 2006 opera Adriana Mater and play with the idea of independent organic rhythms tied together such as the baby's heartbeat in a pregnant woman - a theme central to the opera. The trio was well played by Gloria Cheng and two members of the Calder Quartet, Jonathan Moerschel and Eric Byers, which set the tone for this sometimes quiet and introspective evening.

This was quickly followed by a solo guitar work, All in Twilight by Toru Takemitsu played by Michael Kudirka. As with many of Takemitsu's works, silence and space plays as big a role in the music here as the actual sound. Wrapping up the first half was Dutilleux' Ainsi la Nuit performed by the Lyris Quartet. These twelve short movements gave off exactly the kind of glow that one might associate with the moon and I was just as impressed with the Lyris players here as I was when they played David Lang's Difficulty of Crossing a Field for Long Beach Opera last year.

But all of this sparse nighttime music led to something a bit more unexpected: Chinary Ung's 2006 work for small ensemble and two sopranos, Aura, conducted by Hilt. The nearly hour long piece is filled with Asian elements, some from Ung's own birthplace of Cambodia. The six string players, three winds, two percussionists, and vocalists were all given double duty on both their own instruments as well as cymbals, water glasses, or at the very least vocalization of sounds more akin to chanting than singing. While some of the text used Khmer and Pali words, much of it did not, heightening the sense of ritual performance in the piece.

Sopranos Elissa Johnston and Kathleen Roland were both provided lovely bright vocal sound on top of an often surprisingly large output from the small orchestra, expressing the sense of these various untranslated words. The sound spun outward in a consistent and somewhat meditative way that slowly swept you into it. It's one of those pieces where by the end you feel you've gotten somewhere even if you're not exactly sure how you got there. It's what my friend Robert described as what Mahler imagined himself to be writing with Das Lied von der Erde. And there's truth to that, if at least in the work's format, though there is something about Aura that while not unaware of death, seems less completely transfixed by it.

It received the biggest and most enthusiastic response of the evening and it certainly felt much larger than the resources used in its production would imply. But this may be the story of Jacaranda as well, and the work suited the evening. Out of love for 20th- and 21st-century music and the ambition to martial available resources, a hugely successful concert series has thrived by the sea featuring music that often goes looking for a home.

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