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Music Review: The 'Deadpan Lunacy' of Simon Steen-Andersen at Miller Theater

By Justin Davidson



Photo: Karli Cadel

If you were a kid long enough ago — or if your parents stowed their childhood playthings in the attic and produced them a few decades later — you might remember Multiway Rollway. You'd erect elaborate structures of wooden slats, then send a marble gliding along cylindrical grooves, changing directions in hollowed-out corner blocks, and dropping through circular holes on their way to the floor and under the bed. Or perhaps you've seen the *The Way Things Go*, by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, a 30-minute video from 1987 of a jury-rigged machine self-destructing in exquisitely timed phases: Rolling cogs tip chairs that flip seesaws, releasing balls, pouring liquids, and lighting fuses.

That fascination with wackadoodle contraptions energizes the Danish composer and installation artist Simon Steen-Andersen, who opened Miller Theater's concert season by turning the whole place into a giant noisemaker. He fitted out the hall and the backstage area with keyboards, wheels, pipes, motors, and a flesh-and-blood string quartet, then — well before the concert — retraced the path he had built with a microphone and a camera. Along the way, he banged on everything he could find, as merrily as a 6-year old clattering a stick along an iron fence. The result is the raw material for *Run Time Error*, a devilishly playful video piece that mixes duct-tape tinkering with

high technology. Steen-Andersen projected two copies of the video side by side and controlled them with a pair of joysticks, running each one now forwards, now back, accelerating one while slowing down the other, in a two-part counterpoint of images and sound. On the left, a violinist rides the handicapped lift to the balcony level, while on the right, he comes back down, the music he's playing competing with the retrograde version of itself and the mechanism's electric whine. It could almost be a digital-age sequel to the factory scene in *Modern Times*.

The composer's co-conspirators in this evening of deadpan lunacy were the members of the JACK Quartet, who soldiered heroically through the musical boot camp Steen-Andersen had arranged for them. In a filmed performance, they play Schumann with their bow arms shackled to half-gallon jugs of water, their left hands restrained by bungee cords. The musicians wear headphones that fill their ears with white noise, so that they can no longer hear each other and the familiar score slips out of sync like a disintegrating clockwork. Later, on the stage, the quartet's cellist Kevin McFarland played a duet with a projected image of himself, the live and virtual soloists overlapping perfectly into a Shiva-like figure with multiple limbs.

Steen-Andersen is the rare contemporary composer who makes music with a sense of humor — slaps it together, really, out of rough, unsanded sounds and visual gags. He has a bit of John Cage's impishness, and a similar disregard for harmoniousness and polished timbres. But unlike Cage, he leaves little to chance. Steen-Andersen doesn't even try to beguile the ear as inventively as he dazzles the eye. Instead, he's a perfectionist choreographer, whose work depends on bug-free software, high-precision mayhem, and the fearless virtuosity that the JACK Quartet was happy to provide.

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