

Music review: Nascent Newport Contemporary Music Series is worthy of a following

By Keith Powers / Special to The Journal

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The Newport Contemporary Music Series opened its inaugural season this weekend with the promises of adventurous music — and with adventurous musicians pursuing it.

The modest attendance Sunday afternoon at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Jamestown reflected the challenges a new festival faces: gorgeous holiday beach weather, largely unfamiliar repertory, and the time it takes to build a robust audience.

But the repertory, and the playing, were worthy of any evening in a sold-out room. Violinist Michael Hustedde and violist Amberley Lamphere robustly executed John Williams' "Duo Concertante" — tightly articulated, pitch-secure despite the tune-destroying humidity.

French pianist Melaine Dalibert filled the remainder of the program's first half with three bravura works: a pair by Gérard Pesson, including a festival commission, and Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata.

Pesson's short pieces fascinated. The first, "La lumière n'a pas de bras pour nous porter" (The light has no arms to carry us), used white keys only — and often barely played those. Dalibert tapped lightly, percussively, not depressing the keys, but creating barely audible rhythms similar to drumming fingertips on a table.

He interspersed this with occasional "real" notes. But the percussive energy that came from tapping the keys — it didn't always work, as some extraneous sounds emerged — built a palpable musical tension.

Dalibert's reading of the Copland sonata was exquisite. The highlight was its compelling second movement, all jazzy energy and easy rhythms.

World premieres are always special — no matter the venue or the size of the audience. Pesson's "Music for Newport" found an attentive interpreter in Dalibert. The single movement explores sounds — not textures — non-narratively, for their own value. Each note makes reference to what follows and what it follows — not building to any musical story, but creating linked clues toward understanding.

Composer Michael Vincent Waller's "Bounding" also benefited from Dalibert's artistry. Built obsessively on an accented triplet, with barely shifting repeated patterns, "Bounding" combines easy listening with subtle sophistication.

Dalibert also explored festival artistic director Paul Van Anglen's angular "Schizofrenico," and cellist Jeremiah Barcus joined him and Hustedde for Elliot Carter's "Epigrams" — a dozen or so aptly named, ultra-brief sonic excursions, each whimsical but deliciously delicate.

Small audiences? Not to worry. With playing — and music — like this, the Newport Contemporary Music Series will find a following in time.

The Newport Contemporary Music Series runs July 1 through Aug. 12. The next concert is July 15, at 8 p.m. in Portsmouth High School. Tickets are \$45-\$55. Call (401) 829-7593 or visit ncmsri.org.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse papers and WBUR's The ARTery. On Twitter at [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).

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