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A French Color Palette Takes in the Eye and Ear 'Luminance of Color,' French Accent at Le Poisson Rouge

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Sometimes an idea for a concert with an unusual twist will sound fine in the planning discussions, but in performance — either because circumstances were unaccounted for or because the spirit of the evening moved in unforeseen ways — elements that should have jelled did not. The program that the violinist Harumi Rhodes, the pianist Molly Morkoski, the cellist Caroline Stinson and the visual artist Makoto Fujimura presented at Le Poisson Rouge on Monday evening was one of those, but enough of it went right that you could chalk the rest up as a noble failure, worth trying again.

What the musicians and Mr. Fujimura arranged was a program, "Luminance of Color," that explored 20th-century works with a French accent (though not necessarily by French composers), with Mr. Fujimura providing a visual component that included video and live painting using traditional Japanese materials, including gold, silver and silk. Given that the music deals in mostly pastel hues, the painting, presumably, was to supply the luminance of the title.



As it turned out, the lighting onstage left the video washed out, and the projection of Mr. Fujimura's painting was jittery and angled uncomfortably. You couldn't make much of it, but you suspected that in a different setting, with technology more firmly under control, it might have worked.

The music making, at least, was beyond reproach. Ms. Rhodes and Ms. Morkoski began with a thoughtfully inflected performance of Ravel's Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano, a single-movement work from 1897 that was left unpublished until 1975. It was a canny choice: Ravel's second sonata, composed 30 years later and suffused with jazz influences, is a more popular work, but this score, with its contrastingly meditative and fevered passages, shows Ravel forming his distinctive approach to color and harmony.

Ms. Rhodes and Ms. Morkoski played the Ravel with flexibility and warmth, and admirable attention to the score's nuanced dynamics. They brought similar qualities to Takemitsu's early "Distance de Fée" (1951), a gentle rumination inspired by the work of the Japanese Surrealist poet and painter Shuzo Takiguchi, and suffused with the graceful ambiguities of Impressionistic chromaticism.

Ms. Morkoski continued in that spirit, offering a focused, carefully shaped account of Messiaen's Préludes (1930), a student work that shows him finding his own approach to dissonance and sonic imagery within a language still heavily influenced by Debussy. *She was joined by Ms. Stinson in an appealingly light-toned, understated account of Debussy's Cello Sonata (1915).*

The full ensemble finale, a piano trio version of Piazzolla's "Verano Porteño" (1965) — the "summer" installment of his "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires" — may at first have seemed at odds with the rest of the program. Piazzolla's music, after all, is suffused with distinctively Latin rhythms, particularly those of the tango. But this music draws some of its urbane charm from a French harmonic style, a point this ensemble made clear in its simmering, finely balanced performance.