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MUSIC REVIEW

Echoes of Languages No Longer Heard

Kevin James's 'Vanishing Languages' at Roulette

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

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The “Vanishing Languages” project by [Kevin James](#), a New York-based trombonist and composer, is a rare hybrid of conservation effort and memorial, new music and ancient languages. Prodded by Unesco [statistics](#) that predict that by the end of the century half of the world’s 6,000 languages will be extinct, Mr. James spent months in the field tracking down and recording the last remaining speakers of four critically endangered tongues: Hokkaido Ainu, an aboriginal language from northern Japan, the American Indian Quileute from western

Washington, and Dalabon and Jawoyn, aboriginal languages from Arnhem Land in Australia.



On Friday evening the enigmatic sounds of Ainu and Quileute filled the space at Roulette in Downtown Brooklyn in performances of two works that were as haunting as they were riveting. Both mixed recorded voices, ambient sounds and electronica with a live score performed by a roster of virtuosic and adventurous new-music

Ruby Washington/The New York Times
Vanishing Languages Leah Scholes of Speak Percussion using a double bass bow to play a bowl at Roulette.

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ensembles. The string quartet [Ethel](#) performed “Ainu Inuma;” for “Counting in Quileute” its players joined the Australian trio [Speak Percussion](#) and the [\[kaj\] ensemble](#) (pronounced “cage”) made up of woodwind, brass and string players.

The program provided no printed transcriptions of the streams of foreign words that came in sputters and torrents out of the speakers surrounding the audience and blended in and out of the music. When pressed by an audience member during a short discussion Mr. James revealed only that one of the women heard during “Ainu Inuma” was giving a cooking demonstration. But since the last fluent speaker of Ainu died seven years ago, and the two remaining Quileute speakers “don’t like each other,” according to Mr. James, even the most prosaic words take on the hermetic mystery the Egyptian hieroglyphs held before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone.

While much of Mr. James’s music possesses a mournful quality with keening glissandos, ghostly harmonics and wobbly cello notes that echo the brittle voices of the very old, it also manages to convey his fascination with the surface beauty of language. Both pieces call on performers to mimic speech on their instruments with extended technique and constant fluctuations of speed and meter.

In “Ainu Inuma” players also imitated the sound of a type of bamboo jaw harp played by the Ainu by striking the strings with the wooden side of their bows. The singing and moaning sounds of Dorothy Lawson’s cello were sometimes so close to the voice of of one female speaker that she became in effect her body double.

“Counting in Quileute,” which opens with bells struck and bowed and swung in the air, and ends with the ring of a Buddhist prayer bowl had a strong ritualistic feel to it. The often puzzling actions of the players — flutists whispering into mouthpieces, a cellist tapping with both

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hands on the fingerboard as if playing a recorder — appeared like a secret choreography designed to bring forth the voices of the dead filtered through the crackle of old phonographs.

The imperfections of these old recordings, which Mr. James used alongside those he made recently in the field, show how heavily smudged the window is that we have on these vanishing cultures. And yet at times it seemed as if it were these voices who were willing the performance into existence.