

Michelle Shocked

"Are you indulging me a little?" Michelle Shocked asked her audience at the 9:30 club Sunday night. Well, yes, you could say that. In fact, the crowd was clearly willing to overlook the countless false starts, missed cues, abrupt finishes and deflected requests that punctuated the sprawling show in return for a thoroughly spontaneous performance. Besides, how often do you hear a singer-songwriter with a strong affinity for Appalachian music exuberantly performing and choreographing soul classics like "Cool Jerk" and "Brick House"?

Backed by her new three-piece soul band, the Anointed Earls (a Southern corruption of "anointed oils"), Shocked spent most of her time onstage raising the crowd's spirits but not before trying to raise its awareness of what she called "environmental racism" in Louisiana. A short Greenpeace film titled "Cancer Alley" prefaced her band's performance and served as the inspiration for the title track of her new limited-edition CD, "Good News." "This used to be God's country—Heaven on Earth, peace in the valley—now they call it Cancer Alley," she declared in a voice at once searing and sorrowful.

For the most part, though, Shocked seem intent on having a good time, singing robustly, dancing wildly and constantly urging the crowd to do the same. The ensuing funkathon hardly suited some of her best-known tunes, but she squeezed in a laconic version of "Anchorage" and unveiled a few new songs that revealed "Good News" to be something more than the glorified demo she described it to be.

—Mike Joyce

5 Chinese Brothers

Five Chinese Brothers specialize in three-minute voyages of loss, re-

gret and the occasional humble triumph. No art or attitude necessary. Theirs is roots music, the kind that is earthy but not floral. The kind you find wherever people are flushing the workweek from their systems. At Iota on Friday, the New York five-piece group offered up two sets of masterly songcraft to eager ears.

The crowd, like the musicians, were professionals in search of a dressed-down good time. Singer and rhythm guitarist Tom Meltzer kept brains as well as bodies working with references to Popeye, Buster Keaton, Jackie Chan and Paul Cezanne. Keyboardist Neil Thomas pulled out an accordion to add some Cajun spice to "Three Cool Guys." There were echoes of Hank Williams in "I Can See" while "My Dad's Face" was a stately waltz of the John Prine school. Each song was instantly memorable, yet tastefully understated.

However, the band's unpretentious presence flirted with indistinction. Although the twangy arpeggios and bluesy slide of lead guitarist Stephen Antonakos threatened to make real barn-burners out of the up-tempo numbers, the performance never quite caught fire. While song after song displayed masterfully sculpted hooks, they begged the visceral delivery that sets apart country-rock charismatics like Steve Earle or Maria McKee. Toward the end of the evening, driving numbers like "Blue Boy" finally delivered with the chorus and double-time coda evoking the hurtling train of the lyrics.

—Bob Massey

Verdehr Trio

For two decades now, the Verdehr Trio has tirelessly commissioned new works for violin, clarinet and piano. A recital on Sunday at the Phillips Collection revealed some of

the fruits of its labors.

It was surprising to hear such a like-minded embrace of tonality (however jagged or dyspeptic) among the four contemporary composers represented. Thomas Christian David's "Aziz Djune" spins a Persian love song into the sort of nutty romantic chase you'd find in a Tex Avery cartoon, before settling into something closer to Kurt Weill in mood.

"Glint" and "Rain Waves" by Americans Jacob Druckman and Joan Tower, respectively, abound in pictorial detail. Druckman's music imagines the lingering effects of explosive bursts of light around a night-shrouded swamp. Tower bookends an ambiguous rainy-day conversation between the clarinet and violin with whirls of splashing, drizzling, dripping and cascading notes. The most romantic and single-minded of the pieces, Dinos Constantinides' "Study III," meditates on the modalities of traditional Greek music.

The musicians' brio and attention to minute detail bespoke their dedication to this music of our time. Elsa Ludwig-Verdehr of the Verdehr Trio, starting with power and coloristic range from her clarinet as well as, regrettably, some distractingly loud huffing and puffing around the mouthpiece. Despite patches of acidic tone, violinist Walter Verdehr played incisively throughout. Pianist Gary Kirkpatrick ceded the spotlight repeatedly to his colleagues, but contributed a welcome subtlety to the mix.

Beside all the new music, brief pieces by Beethoven and Bruch seemed oddly out of place, neatly played though they were.

—Joe Banno

Arlington Symphony

A propulsive performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18, turned up the heat Sunday at the Arlington Symphony's

concert, titled "Pasop O'Connell Hignian virtuoso Svet. dominated the a-muscular yet delic this enduring roma-

Navassardian i control, diving into ing melody with e Ruben Vartanyan partner. Impressiv cussion playing fro drove the work aldy acoustics and ir tion between orch threatened at time: info chaos.

In contrast, a co married Schubert's in B-flat, D.485. Wi tension, Schubert's piece can fade int melodies.

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The Weekend section's itinerary includes places where Clara Barton, Mary McLeod Bethune and Susan B. Anthony made history, along with the new Eleanor Roosevelt statue at the FDR