

## He's offensive in a good way

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Time was when one of the primary functions of an American artist was to offend. [...]

This music was doing its job.

The program was "Fear and Loathing: The Music of Phil Kline," best known for "Unsilent Night," a Christmas event put on by Relache that's a procession of boom boxes emitting mellifluous electronic music. "Fear and Loathing" had mellifluous moments to a different end: Confrontational ideas were stated in a nice musical tone of voice.

The point wasn't irony, but directness, which made the composer's message all the more unavoidable. I hung on every note; others walked. I also applaud the courage of his artistry. Kline offends not for being arbitrarily oblique, but out of vision and conviction. He also gets American audiences where they live - in the form of song.

He follows none of the traditional formats, but in a minimalist-based aesthetic sets up a rhythmic groove or melodic ostinato that has both vernacular familiarity and unsettling undercurrents, with a vocal line fashioned for optimum presentation of the text.

He chooses texts you'd never expect to hear in music, such as statements by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld revealing odd, circular logic. The result, *Three Rumsfeld Songs*, has the dreamy quality of French symbolist poets that falls easily on the ear, but becomes disturbing when you realize these are words of a high government official.

Kline's *Zippo Songs* are more mercilessly direct: The words are taken from highly personal phrases that Vietnam War soldiers scratched on their Zippo lighters, reflecting some of the darkest states of mind - some embracing death and destruction - ever put to music.

Performances by Kline's quasi-rock-band ensemble were headed by light-voiced baritone Theo Bleckmann. His military-style crew cut and uniformlike clothes were a great contrast to his eerily boyish, passive and mostly unemotional vocal style. It was just what you didn't expect, and all the more effective.

The concert's title came from Kline's newish song cycle, *Fear and Loathing*, drawn from texts by 1970s gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Sung with deadpan humor by bass Wilbur Pauley, the music captured the frenzy of that hard-partying milieu. "Breakfast of Champions," a paean to hedonism, had the words wittily juxtaposed against Bach's "Prelude in C Major" from the *Well Tempered Clavier, Book I*. [...]