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Music for the masses

Aulos Ensemble and the LPO orchestrate a week's worth of outstanding sounds

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One listener jumps to a swing band, the other drifts on a slow reggae beat, and somehow those very different experiences get shoved in a category called "pop" music. The same absurd jumbling occurs when one slaps the "classical" label on music -- a point driven home by two wonderful concerts in New Orleans this week.

On Tuesday, a great "period instrument" ensemble from New York captured the lively improvised spirit of music that was first played by candlelight in royal chapels and domestic music rooms.

On Wednesday, our resident orchestra used all the resources of modern instruments to launch its suburban "Casual Classics" series.

To hear the Aulos Ensemble properly, I moved to the seventh row of the recital hall at the University of New Orleans -- close enough to register the complex overtones and harmonic felicities of instruments that were designed for the most intimate settings.

Up close, I could hear the bagpipe drone of Linda Quan's gut-string violin, the pulsing dance rhythms carried by Myron Lutzke's baroque cello, the deep thunder hidden amid the harpsichord strumming of Arthur Hass, and the bubbling improvised fervor of the winds: Christopher Krueger on a wooden flute, Marc Schachman on a keyless ancestor of the modern oboe.

The ensemble's diverse program included a keyboard solo, duets, trio settings and the full quintet, and highlighted rarely heard music by Vivaldi, Rameau, Couperin and others. The most recent compositions dated from before the American Revolution, but the music sounded brand new in the hands of the Aulos Ensemble.

This band of veterans has been together since 1973, and it showed in works such as Rameau's "Suite from Les Fetes d'Hebe." One heard it in their near-telepathic rapport, in their dance-driven rhythmic panache, in the risky improvised flights that are key to such music, and in deft, group-crafted arrangements that evoked the rich sonorities of a period orchestra with only five instruments.