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MUSIC REVIEW

Salonen, slightly sentimental



You say goodbye, I say hello.

The goodbyes have begun. But for Esa-Pekka Salonen's final Green Umbrella concert as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic on Tuesday night in Walt Disney Concert Hall -- the start of his last two weeks with his orchestra of 17 years -- it was mainly in with the new.

Sentimentality wasn't completely banished. A video tribute to Salonen brought a tear or two to the eye. The program ended with "Floof," a wacky, still fresh Salonen piece first heard on the new music series in 1991, the year before he took over the orchestra.

Typically Nordic cool, Salonen didn't speak Tuesday. Waves and baton to heart served to warmly acknowledge the outpouring of audience emotion. Mainly, though, he set to business. Preceding "Floof" were premieres by four emerging composers in their late 20s and early 30s who had been commissioned for the occasion.

The rules were simple: Anything goes for any combination of instruments up to 20. Microphones, loudspeakers and electrical outlets were supplied as needed.

Steven Stucky, the Philharmonic's consulting composer for new music, who is also bidding the orchestra farewell after an enormously productive two-decade association, was talent scout. He scoured the globe and made a point of demonstrating that new music may now be the most international of all art forms.

Enrico Chapela is from Mexico and lives in Paris, and his "Li Po" was based on a fellow Mexican poet's tribute to a Chinese poet. Anna Clyne is British and Brooklyn-based. Fang Man, who is Chinese, is currently at Cornell, and her resume lists noted French, Italian, American, British, Russian and Chinese composers with whom she has studied. Erin Gee went by way of Santa Barbara to Iowa to Austria, where she is now based.

What these four composers have in common is an arresting command of a vast sound world. They all went for more, not less, in all ways. The ensembles were large. The instrumentation was wildly varied. Electronics were commonplace.

None of these composers -- all are talents -- seems particularly interested in articulation of melody, rhythm and counterpoint. They are harmonists, collagists, gatherers. Modernist abstraction, focused Minimalism and popsy Post-Minimalism have been supplanted by big-time Maximalism. Thick sonic soups were cooked up full of many types of musical ingredients. Less is no longer more.

Chapela's "Li Po," in many ways the most interesting work, is for large ensemble and is very much all over the map. Chapela uses sophisticated computer programming of the French spectral school to fool around with phonic syllables, Spanish- and Chinese-based. But the electronics are only one layer. There are all kinds of compelling instrumental effects, exciting visceral rhythms and tons of tones sliding around (sliding tones are big with all the composers).

Clyne's "Within Her Arms" for string orchestra was the only piece without electronics, but you would hardly have guessed from her luminous textures or those amazingly deep buzzing basses whose sound seemed to come from somewhere under the stage. She's especially into sliding tones, and they save her from schmaltziness.

A dirge-like, folksy violin melody of very limited range is the 14-minute score's obsession. The world she evokes is very British, that of Michael Tippett, John Tavener and Thomas Tallis. But nothing ever feels quite settled. She starts going one way, then goes another, as if adrift at sea, ever bobbing up and down. The texture of sound, though, was lovely.

Gee's "Mouthpiece XI," is part of series of vocal explorations the composer has been undertaking. Performing from a wheelchair (she had recently injured her feet), she virtuosically switched back and forth between two microphones, one for mouthing phonemes, the other for vocal click and pops. A large ensemble is kept busy. Winds and strings happily slide here and there between pitches. Winds and percussion chatter. The bass drum booms.

Fang's "Deluge" is aptly titled. She seems to have taken something from each of the many composers with whom she worked and then thrown everything into a great big multi-culti melange for large ensemble and electronics. A listener can have a lot of fun picking out the pieces, but here, perhaps, a little less might have been plenty.

In this company, Salonen's "Floof" for soprano and five instruments really did sound from another generation. But the dizzying invention of the instrumental lines and the hilarious vocal part with text taken from Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem's "The Cyberiad" and sensationally sung by Hila Plitmann hold up spectacularly well. The soprano is a poetry machine, sputtering to life and becoming the life of the party. Some might say that, however superficially, describes the composer's own development.

The Green Umbrella series, now nearly three decades old, has been Salonen's baby during his music directorship. He insisted it survive through hard times, even financially supporting it from his own pocket. Tuesday night, he expertly and lovingly led symphony orchestra players who might easily have been mistaken for members of one of the world's top new music ensembles.

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