

THE ORANGE COUNTY
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Young composers take over Green Umbrella



You never know quite what you're going to get at a Green Umbrella concert, and that's a big part of the fun. The L.A. Philharmonic's new music series is designed to be surprising. The rule of law has been loosened here. Composers can do what they want, without the worry of commercial consequence. Audiences (large ones, as a matter of fact) arrive in the spirit of adventure; they remain unfazed by whatever is thrown at them. Actually, the weirder the better.

Tuesday night's event was Esa-Pekka Salonen's last Green Umbrella concert as music director. A short film commemorated his 17 years in the position; when he stepped to the podium a standing ovation was his reward. Otherwise, no speeches, no flowers, no gold watches. Those will come in the next couple of weeks, no doubt, when he leads his final subscription series programs.

The program was specially designed, though, at Salonen's request. Four young composers, more or less unknowns, were commissioned to write pieces, their only directive being, apparently, a limit of 20 musicians. The net was spread wide and ended up snaring Enrico Chapela, a Mexican living in Paris, Anna Clyne, a Brit living in Brooklyn, Erin Gee, a Californian living in Austria, and Fang Man, a Chinese living in New York. The last three listed are women. The composers range in age from their late 20s to mid-30s. Salonen's "Floof," written when he was 24, and the first piece of his own that he conducted on this series, in 1991, capped the evening off.

One can hardly generalize about the four composers except to say that they seemed to feel free to do what they wanted, far more free than composers did a generation or two ago. Three of them used amplification, two used electronics. All appeared to be confident, clever, skilled and imaginative.

Chapela's "Li Po" gets the award for most energetic. The work was composed through an involved process that included the composer reading a Spanish poem into a tape recorder and translating the reading's pitches and notes into a musical score. A computer program or two got involved along the way; at any rate, there was little resemblance between spoken word and the resulting piece that I could discern.

What emerged was a barrage of tightly intertwined instrumental and taped sounds, all over the place but tumbling over each other and closely related in timbre. It was difficult at times to tell where the tape sounds – wind, rain, buzz saws, frogs, whistles – stopped and in the instrumental sounds began. Ethereal and whomping episodes intervened, and then big slow waves. It was ten minutes of controlled mayhem, but that control was key – it gave the work shape and personality.

Clyne's "Within Her Arms," written in remembrance of her mother, was perhaps the most traditional work performed, an elegy of sorts for strings. There are 15 separate string parts (one to a part), and though the melodic material is limited in scope and tonal, the strict division of the parts and their counterpoint keep the music in a continual state of muted unrest and activity. "Arms" sound a little like a fluttery, ungraspable Barber's Adagio.

Gee's "Mouthpiece XI" was the most original piece. The composer, with two microphones in hand, vocally produced a series of clicks, pops, whistles, sputters, and fast mumbling in no language whatsoever, the instrumental forces chasing her as the tail of a comet. It was all mesmerizing, and strangely enchanting.

Fang Man's "Deluge," inspired by a Kandinsky painting of the same name, is a formidable work

for tape and orchestra, strenuous, loud, sinister and celestial. While vigorous and entertaining, one felt that it was a little overloaded – did she really need *two* sets of tuned crystal wine glasses, and a saw? – or perhaps unfocused. Nevertheless, it was as impressive as a rocket launch, which at one point it sounded like.

"Floof" brought up the rear. Based on the work of the Polish sci-fi writer Stanislaw Lem, the work sketches the progress of a poetry machine (a coloratura soprano) as it learns its trade. Salonen calls the "Floof" "a love poem within the realm of tensor algebra ... set to dodecaphonic rap music."

It's also quite funny, avant-garde music gone bonkers. Hila Plitmann sang the soprano part from memory, a robot that first clears its throat but gradually finds words and spins out of control. One half expected her to explode. The zany accompaniment is for contrabass clarinet, percussion, cello and a couple of keyboards, including synthesizer – a "Star Wars" band gone wild.

All par for the course for Green Umbrella.

Timothy Mangan 08/04/2009

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