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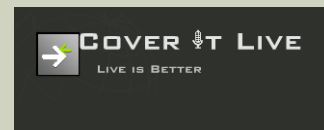
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The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's New Music Festival ended not with a bang, but a contemplative whimper Friday night as its 18th annual version of the event wound down its week-long exploration of all things ecstatic.

The grandly titled program, Symphonic Rebirth, featured the North American premiere of British composer John Tavener's Requiem (2008) with Rebecca Woodmass (soprano), James McLennan (tenor), the Canadian Mennonite University Chorus (Janet Brenneman/Rudy Schellenberg, co-conductors), and the WSO (including a lofty brass section in the balcony) arranged roughly as a cruciform.

At centre stage was WSO principal cellist Yuri Hooker -- representing the primordial white light that is said to appear when the spirit passes into the next realm. WSO maestro Alexander Mickelthwate led the combined forces throughout the 40-minute work as well as the entire program.

If you're looking for a Requiem with fire and brimstone (la Verdi), or melodious lushness (think Faure) this is probably not it. What Tavener does, instead, is blend together Roman Catholic, Sanskrit, Hebrew and Arabic texts into one giant melting pot of faith traditions that, while commendable, is nevertheless fraught with pitfalls of cohesion and perilous fragmentation.

He does provide a key for understanding with the work's subtitle: "Our glory lies where we cease to exist." However, with the exception of the climatic fourth movement, Khalil's Dance, much of the work felt like a marriage of convenience. It's only during the final movement where Tavener's point is driven home.

As an increasingly complex tapestry of sound gradually subsumes Woodmass and McLennan, it's as if all become equal -- singing, as it were, with one voice.

WSO composer-in-residence Vincent Ho, if not already one of Canada's most gifted younger composers, is surely the luckiest. His highly anticipated world premiere of Fallen Angel: In Memoriam Richard D'Amore (2006) was named on Monday as one of five winning entries (out of 156) in the CBC Evolution composer's competition, that will see Ho packing his bags for a Banff residency next month.

Fallen Angel is dedicated to the California-based photographer Richard D'Amore, 66, who died while Ho was completing the score. The stirring work itself gives further proof of Ho's expansive dramatic sensibility, with a focused intensity that speaks directly to the heart. After opening with savage percussive brutality, the piece eventually bleeds into mournful quotes of Bach's Air on the G String, before a gossamer piano interpolation ends the work with a final, unresolved cadence.

Gregory Kozak's Concerto for Chariot of Choir and Strings provided the magic for the night, with the ScrapArtsMusic's co-founder/composer/inventor donning gloves to stroke the 22 aluminum wire strings of his latest creation: a 30-foot junkyard contraption with the delicate soul of a glass harmonica.

The program also included a world premiere of rjan Sandred's Labyrinths in the Wind, featuring Allen Harrington performing on a Yamaha WX5 wind MIDI controller.

holly.harris@shaw.ca

CONCERT REVIEW

WSO New Music Festival
Symphonic Rebirth
Friday, February 6
Centennial Concert Hall
Attendance: 1,310
(three and a half stars out of five)

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