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Concerts of Mystery and Imagination

Spring for Music, a Festival of Orchestras, Plays Carnegie Hall

By JAMES R. OESTREICH MAY 9, 2014

Spring for Music, the annual festival of North American orchestras at Carnegie Hall, was created in large part to encourage adventurous programming and has in its four years produced odd juxtapositions within concerts, typically with some thematic goal in view. But when it comes to juxtaposing whole programs, anything goes, and the results can be mind-bending.

Such was the case with the stark shift from the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra's offering on Wednesday evening, a concert version of Howard Hanson's fusty 1933 opera, "Merry Mount," to that of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra on Thursday, an up-to-the-minute collection of works by Canadian composers. Stretching to find a connection, you might point to denatured traces of American Indian music in "Merry Mount" alongside more vital adaptations of native Canadian culture in Derek Charke's "13 Inuit Throat Song Games" and Vincent Ho's percussion concerto "The Shaman," but that would be about it.

Thursday's program began with the Symphony No. 1 in C minor by the dean of Canadian composers, R. Murray Schafer, 80. Mr. Schafer, who had long avoided writing symphonies, finally relented in 2010, working on commission for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Though tonal enough to be assigned a key, the three-movement work is not conventionally symphonic, its episodic outer movements seeming more concerned with color than with structure. The middle movement (marked Mysteriously) is the most symphonic in its thematic development, its broad scope and its heft and gravity.

It is there, too, that Mr. Schafer most boldly exhibits his trademark theatricality, assigning the string players to whistle tunes in unison. But even that stroke paled compared with the thoroughgoing theatricality of the rest of the program, as supplied mostly by the soloists for whom the works were tailored:

Tanya Tagaq, the throat singer, and the ever wizardly percussionist Evelyn Glennie in “The Shaman.”

Coming soon after a New York appearance by Tuvan throat singers, Ms. Tagaq’s performance held particular interest, but it was frustratingly hard to take in. Her vocalization seemed less a matter of drones and overtones, like those of the Tuvans, than one of grunts and heavy breaths manipulated with a microphone.

The vocal games are traditionally played by two women, Mr. Charke’s program notes indicate, but instead he set Ms. Tagaq’s voice against massed instruments, writing first for the Kronos Quartet and now for the Winnipeg Symphony. Alas, even with amplification, it was hard to separate out the voice from the rich sonorities of the orchestra, with its Celtic-like fiddling and more vigorous outbursts, or to determine precisely what sounds Ms. Tagaq was making: a sad loss.

Perhaps Alexander Mickelthwate, the orchestra’s music director, who conducted expertly elsewhere, could have held the ensemble back a bit, or perhaps the amplification could have been greater without debasing the sound completely. More likely, it seemed, the piece may simply not work with such large forces in so big a hall.

In any case, there was no such problem with the percussion dynamo Ms. Glennie in Mr. Ho’s brilliant and compelling concerto.

“Merry Mount,” which had an acclaimed premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1934, now seems a period piece. Based on a Hawthorne short story, it centers on a Puritan preacher’s crisis of faith in a New England village, but atop this intimate personal struggle are laid the trappings of grand opera, all out of scale.

The workmanship is remarkable for a first-time (only-time) opera composer; inspiration of lasting import is another matter. Nevertheless, the Rochester Philharmonic’s revival of a major work of its hometown hero is admirable, and the 250 or so performers (including the Eastman Rochester Chorus and the Bach Children’s Chorus of Nazareth College) gave it all it was worth.

The orchestra lacks a music director at the moment, but Michael Christie, who conducted here, offered a well-prepared and meticulously executed performance. Richard Zeller and Sara Jakubiak sang the lead roles ardently and

effectively.

Spring for Music runs through Saturday at Carnegie Hall; 212-247-7800, carnegiehall.org.

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