

Thursday, May 25, 2006

A concerto for the mainstream

Review: Lou Harrison's opus puts an exclamation mark on Pacific Symphony's composers festival.

By **TIMOTHY MANGAN**

The Orange County Register

Our mini-crash course on the life and works of Lou Harrison is now, too soon, at an end. The Pacific Symphony's annual American Composers Festival, this year devoted to Harrison (and apparently the first by a major orchestra to do so), is always over too soon. With its smart combination of new and little-known music, talks and visits, a stimulating program guide and DVD, the festival invariably makes a good case for a neglected repertoire, and an American one to boot. The Pacific Symphony pays Orange County a compliment by mounting these expensive enterprises, assuming the interest, and need, of the community. The compliment isn't invariably returned in the form of warm bodies in seats, or at least not in the numbers there should be.

Why should you care about Lou Harrison? How about this? Harrison believed (at least in most of his work) that music should be beautiful. It seems to me that, more than most composers of his era (he died in 2003), he kept the listener in mind, the average listener, not academic sophisticates or European intellectuals (who have tended to dismiss him).



HIGH NOTES: Barry Perkins plays piccolo trumpet with the Harvey Mudd American Gamelan at American Composers Festival.

MIKE SCHWARTZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

AMERICAN COMPOSERS FESTIVAL

With: Pacific Symphony; Carl St.Clair, conductor; Ursula Oppens, piano

When: May 24

Where: Segerstrom Hall

Next: 8 p.m. on June 2, Walt Disney Concert Hall (different program)

How much: \$45-\$85

Call: (714) 755-5799

Explaining Harrison's music sometimes makes it sound more cerebral and difficult than it is to understand and imbibe. Certainly, the 1985 Piano Concerto, which artistic adviser Joseph Horowitz called the centerpiece of this festival and deserving of inclusion in the mainstream repertoire, has some of these qualities. For instance, the piano is tuned in a special way - called "Kirnberger No. 2 Well-Temperament" - which gives many of the intervals a lovely glow (because they are tuned to "perfect" intervals), while the A-natural ends up somewhat out of tune. Indonesian gamelan and North Indian music serve as inspiration to the work. The pianist, at times, uses an "octave bar" to depress whole clusters of notes at once.

But the big, 30-minute, four-movement work is lovable and visceral, not lost in its own sophistication. Pianist Ursula Oppens, who played it Wednesday night in Segerstrom Hall, calls it Brahmsian, and it certainly has something of that composer's rich, thick sound and lapel-shaking passion. Also, melody - long, arcing melody. Also, virtuosity, as in the pianist having a rip-roaring good time.

The work was actually written for Keith Jarrett (who recorded it), and the piano part sounds a little bit like his whirling, rhythmically juiced style. The first two movements are the biggest and most athletic, a soaring, open-range Allegro in sonata form, then an unbelievable "Stampede," with drums pounding and the piano doing somersaults and martial arts and generally making such rhythmic mayhem as you've never heard before. Great fun. The peaceful Largo that ensues makes celestial use of C major, here given an extra halo by the tuning (unfortunately lessened by an not-so-soft electronic hum, in a different key, somewhere in the hall). The finale, an Allegro moderato, bringing in that Indian style, is richly patterned, ribbons upon ribbons of music, with bells ringing prettily, and a bongo lending snazzy syncopation.

I would have no problem hearing this work more often, and I doubt most audiences would. The performance was a solid one. Oppens brought a classical, clean sensibility to the solo part while playing the dickens out of it. Carl St.Clair and the orchestra laid into the sonorous melodies with feeling and grandeur. I love the trombone trio in this piece, adding its own holy commentary. One can imagine other interpretations - a flashier soloist, say, a more voluptuous orchestra - but this one served the music well.

The first half of the program consisted of smaller, delectable Harrison morsels. Bill Alves and the Harvey Mudd American Gamelan played the 1981 "Gending Hephaestus," in a ruminative Javanese idiom. Then Barry Perkins, on piccolo trumpet, joined them for "Burbaran Robert," adding Baroque decorations to the ringing hum. Harrison's "A Parade," composed for the opening of Michael Tilson Thomas' tenure at the San Francisco Symphony, is Ivesian in its layering of musics, and an organ, snare drum and oxygen tanks (clunked with mallets) add to the celebratory, giddily contrapuntal mood.

Harrison's "Elegy to the Memory of Calvin Simmons" proved to be one of the more gorgeous examples of its kind, an ambling, rapt adagio worthy to stand alongside Barber's. The 1951 Suite for Violin, Piano and Small Orchestra is neoclassical. With its tack piano; celesta; fragmented, repeating phrases; and Asian scales it sounds like Stravinsky on a Balinese holiday. Raymond Kobler extolled the solo violin part tenderly; Gloria Cheng dispatched the minimalistic piano riffs with just the right verve and rhythmic emphasis. The Los Angeles-based pianist has also performed the Piano Concerto, by the way. Hmmm, maybe we could have her back.