



A Concert of Intergenerational Music Making

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MusicalAmerica.com

February 3, 2010

NEW YORK – The American Composers Orchestra continued its “Orchestra Underground” series in the subterranean space of Zankel Hall on Jan. 29, with an interdisciplinary and intergenerational program aptly titled “Conversations.” It was more than just a clever moniker; the program resonated with earnest and unconventional collaborations with artists both in- and outside the new-music mainstream.

On the podium was guest conductor Anne Manson, who led the ACO’s Underground New Music Readings in 2008. Those sessions, designed as a workshop for emerging composers to hear their works read by an orchestra, featured Roger Zare, a young doctoral student at the University of Michigan, and the ACO commissioned a work from him for this series.

The result, “Time Lapse,” is an essay in motion and durational layering, intended to convey (in the composer’s words) a “high speed object... slowed down to become perceptible to our senses.” Masterfully orchestrated with a winning sense of color and textural clarity, “Time Lapse” recalls the dense, colorful harmonies and incisive accents of Dutilleux’s “Métaboles.” Sinewy, legato phrases lay upon jagged, staccato figures passed between violins, percussion and winds. There is much dramatic lunging and thrusting at the beginning of the piece, which builds tension. Though Zare might be faulted for yielding that tension too readily (it unravels over several grand pauses, like bumps in the road thwarting forward motion), it is eventually resolved in a shimmering climax of satisfying post-romantic harmonies. Manson led the chamber-sized ACO with taut precision and pressing urgency.

In “Next Atlantis,” composer Sebastian Currier converses with video artist Pavel Wojtasik in a multimedia project that merges live music, prerecorded sounds and film. Wojtasik’s video projection documents quieter moments on New Orleans’ streets, harbors and Gulf oil rigs, meditating abstractly on the city’s proximity to water and, implicitly, Hurricane Katrina.

Though attractively scored for strings, Currier’s bland, elegiac music amounts to little more than a mood-setter, lacking any real narrative. Manson was obliged to conduct with a click-track earpiece -- often the case when prerecorded elements are mixed with live music. Unfortunately, film has a vastly different dialectical relationship to its audience than music does. Here, it invited snoozy passivity, further framing Currier’s score as mere aural wallpaper.

The third and final work was a musical conversation that bridged several dimensions at once: between instrumentalists, between styles and cultural affiliations and between present and past. “Conversations with Cachao,” by the Cuban-born saxophonist and clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera, was written on commission from the Caramoor Festival as an homage to the eclectic Cuban bassist Israel “Cachao” Lopez. In a short film before the performance, D’Rivera explained the origin of the work, which celebrates Lopez’s versatility -- he performed in clubs, at bars, weddings, and with symphony orchestras -- and his family’s friendship with “Cachao.” “Conversations” is a tribute to Lopez’s great musical versatility, using ebullient mambo beats and ostinatos as platforms for improvisations by D’Rivera on saxophone and clarinet and

Robert Black on string bass.

The first movement, "Israel," features an unremarkable and stylistically archaic use of the orchestra, with tuttis that suggest '50s Latin pop clichés bracketing the improvised solo sections. The second movement, "Guajira en la Nieve," is a languid pastoral intermezzo, with birdcalls and wind solos decorating repetitions of a pizzicato chord progression. One waited, with some frustration, for D'Rivera's rich and varied musical perspective to inform his orchestral writing with novelty and surprise. But "Conversations" mostly rehashes the format of the jazz-symphonic hybrid that has been tried many times before, gloriously spotlighting the improvising soloist while making the orchestra look stiff and square.

The finale, "The Return," is more dynamic, with colorful percussion accents in dialogue with the solo instruments, and an extended double bass solo, triumphantly improvised by Black, with wild tapping on the body of the instrument and theatrical two-handed strumming. D'Rivera was especially convincing on clarinet, coaxing dazzling runs with effervescent agility and charm. Anne Manson led ably but mostly stayed out of the way. She drew rough yet enthusiastic playing from the orchestra, which showed a clear affection for this unbuttoned music.

D'Rivera happily obliged the cheering audience with two encores, both Cuban jazz standards, accompanied by Black on bass. The intimacy, simplicity and rhythmic freedom in these short tunes wonderfully conjured the atmosphere of Havana's warm breezes and smoky cafes.

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