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Music Review | Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music

Ambition Abounds in Tanglewood's Exultation Over Contemporary Works



LENOX, Mass. Things were pretty much back to normal here at the Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, which ended on Tuesday. In performance terms that meant that the student forces at the Tanglewood Music Center were fully committed to the festival, an improvement over the 2007 installment, when many of the players were siphoned off for an opera production. And with as many as eight rehearsals for some works, the playing was magnificent.

Even so, a few pieces most notably Peter Lieberson's "Drala," one of this year's drawing cards were dropped because the available rehearsal time proved inadequate.

The problem, if you can call it that, may have been a surfeit of ambition and enthusiasm on the part of the composer Augusta Read Thomas, who directed this year's festival. After two years of uncharacteristically focused programs a celebration of the "Generation of '38" in 2007, and last summer's Elliott Carter festivities

Ms. Thomas and the center were determined to return to the traditional cornucopia approach, with variety (stylistic, national and generational) as the rule. She began with a stack of 1,500 scores and tapes, whittled that to 80, then jettisoned about 50 of those to fit a schedule of six concerts in five days.

If she overreached and a few more works had to be dropped at the last minute, so be it. The four programs I heard between Sunday and Tuesday at Seiji Ozawa Hall were consistently pleasing.

The Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra's program on Monday evening was the highlight, even without its planned centerpiece, the Lieberson work. It began with "Ínguesu" (2003), a piece of inspired madness by the idiosyncratic Mexican composer Enrico Chapela, composed to commemorate a 1999 soccer match between Mexico and Brazil. The orchestra's sections represent the teams (the winds, Mexico; the brasses, Brazil), the fans (strings), the coaches (piano and harp) and the referee (the conductor, naturally), and the action follows the game play by play: at one point the conductor signals a penalty, and a trombonist is ejected.

"Ínguesu" is not brain surgery, as new music sometimes is, but Mr. Chapela's vivid scoring and energetic style hopping (Minimalist chugging blossoms into full-fledged neo-Romantic give and take) keep it entertaining, even for a listener uninterested in soccer. How the music is meant to convey the final score is unclear, but for the record, it was Mexico 4, Brazil 3.

Julian Anderson's "Shir Hashirim" (2001), a setting of part of the Song of Songs, in Hebrew, examined ecstasy from a more sublime perspective, by way of a dramatic, slightly exotic soprano line (sung powerfully by Rosa Betancourt) wrapped in otherworldly orchestral swells and percussion sparkle.

John Zorn's music can be as manic as Mr. Chapela's, but the work Ms. Thomas chose, "Contes de Fées," a 1999 violin concerto, is closer to the lithe spirit of Mr. Anderson's piece. The solo line moves easily between extremes of showiness and graceful, songlike melody, but it also fits tightly into an orchestral fabric that uses a wind machine and plenty of percussion to create the aural imagery of the magical world its title, "Fairy Tales," suggests. Stephanie Nussbaum played the solo line with a finely polished virtuosity. She also made a strong impression on Sunday morning, with a zesty, sure-fingered performance of Aaron Jay Kernis's jazz-tinged "Two Movements (With Bells)" (2007).

The orchestra closed its program with Wolfgang Rihm's "Verwandlung 2: Musik für Orchester" (2005), a rich, bracing work that sounds unmistakably contemporary even as it avoids dissonant serialist angularity, consonant Minimalist repetition and all the other modernist tics. Mr. Rihm's string writing, in particular, is shapely and emotionally direct, and if he makes tough demands on his brasses, the effect is energizing, a perfect way to close a program.

A stray orchestral work, Helen Grime's Clarinet Concerto (2009), opened the Sunday evening concert, which was otherwise devoted to chamber music. Ms. Grime, an English composer born in 1981, seems drawn to melody and textural luxuriance, but she also has an ear for counterpoint and rhythmic complexity that gives her music an appealing edge. The concerto's most entrancing section is a clarinet cadenza in which a combination of trills and sustained tones creates the illusion of several clarinet lines intertwined. Brent Besner was the superb soloist.

Ms. Grime's work was a world premiere, as was Elliott Carter's "Poems of Louis Zukofsky" (2009), on the same program. Lucy Shelton, the soprano, and Thomas Martin, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's associate principal clarinetist, are sufficiently expert in Mr. Carter's music to round off its difficulties, but this one needed little help: its soprano line, though chromatic, is warm-hued and melodic, and the clarinet writing darts around it in a way that brings out the humor in some of Zukofsky's quirky, aphoristic texts.

Also on Sunday evening the guitarist Oren Fader presided over a lively account of Mario Davidovsky's invitingly pointillistic "Festino" (1991), and Ryan McAdams conducted a suitably brash, pulsing performance of Tansy Davies's "neon" (2007), a septet rooted in a Zappaesque raucousness.

A pleasant surprise in the Sunday morning program was Paula Matthusen's piece "of memory and minutiae" (2006), a plaintive, haunting setting of a Norwegian prayer that fragments further with each repetition. Olenka Slywyska gave the soprano line a chantlike quality while cello counterpoint and electronic timbres wove a graceful atmospheric cocoon around it. Christin Wismann was the eloquent soprano in Tania León's song cycle "Singin' Sepia" (1996), one of this composer's most dramatic and beautifully orchestrated works. And a polished ensemble, led by Zachary Boeding's carefully shaped oboe-playing, performed Yehudi Wyner's rugged Quartet for Oboe and String Trio (1999).

Most years the festival ends with the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra concert, so the Tuesday evening recital by the British pianist Nicolas Hodges felt like an epilogue. Not that it was insubstantial. After three programs ruled largely by consonance and directness, if not quite simplicity, an old-style modernist density came roaring back in Mr. Hodges's set.

Among his offerings, all vibrantly played, were Pierre Boulez's "Incises" (1994), a rumbling study in relentless energy; three harmonically dense but affectingly introspective preludes by Henri Dutilleux; Frederic Rzewski's whimsical "Nanosonatas, Book I" (2006); and a wonderfully unpredictable study in the piano's extremes, Hans Thomalla's "Piano Counterpart" (2008).

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