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REVIEW

The L.A. Phil's CDMX puts Mexico in the limelight



It was hard to tell who was making who feel better at Walt Disney Concert Hall Thursday night.

The celebratory first program of the music festival CDMX — which stands for Ciudad de Mexico, or Mexico City — featured the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Gustavo Dudamel conducting and the Mexican pop/rock/folk/jazz star Natalia Lafourcade. Both had cause to be blue.

Earlier that day Dudamel posted on his Facebook page his heartbreak over the Venezuelan government canceling a tour of the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, presumably to punish the conductor — one of the country's most prominent native sons — for defending his people's right to freedom of expression.

Meanwhile Lafourcade's hometown of Mexico City was still digging out from its recent catastrophic earthquake, and she was now visiting a neighbor that has become somewhat unneighborly of late in its public discourse. She began her set with the L.A. Phil by summoning her "beautiful Mexican flag" to rise from sadness and "just look at the sky."

I distrust the cliché of music healing all wounds, tearing down walls and all the rest as much as the next critic. But what can I say? Here it was salving hurt feelings, tearing down walls, defiantly celebrating a neighbor's vast and populous capital that has enriched all aspects of Southern California culture, not least our music.

You didn't need to enter the concert to know that something agreeable was up. In front of the Disney doors a uniformed organ grinder, one of Mexico City's Los Organilleros, was merrily plying his trade, as were others in the lobby areas. CDMX is the latest installment of the L.A. Phil's occasional festivals celebrating the music of a city. And as with the festivals around Reykjavík and Brooklyn, the orchestra attracted a whole new and eager crowd. On this occasion, fans turned out for Lafourcade, a singer who has been collecting Latin Grammys for the past 15 years and now, at age 33, has become an important spokeswoman for Mexican culture — and, like Dudamel, human rights. She also happens to be, all too rare in any culture any more, a superb chanteuse.

Most of the concert belonged to Lafourcade, who sang two long sets, one with her band accompanied by the orchestra, the other with her band alone. But the concert began with Dudamel conducting the L.A. Phil in short orchestral works by three prominent Mexican composers, all of whom have had a relationship with the orchestra and who had something good to say about Mexico and its capital.

Javier Álvarez's "Metro Chabacano," one in the composer's series of pieces named after metro stops, suggests the busy city life of not stopping to smell the roses but somehow being infused by all the life and color all around you.

Enrico Chapela's "inguesu" is a wild and slightly outrageous soccer match. The Mexican winners are the perky woodwinds; the losers are the aggressive brass, with Dudamel throwing out an overstepping trombonist who angrily leaves the stage. Each side has its own folk music and is urged on by harp and piano (the coaches).

The longest of the three, Gabriela Ortiz's 15-minute "Téenek — Invenciones de Territorio"

(Territorial Inventions) and commissioned for the occasion, is a less playful attempt to finding something universal in the local. "Téenek" is both the language of a region of Mexico and the word for "local man," which becomes for Ortiz a symbol for universality, since we all are, despite political rhetoric, local men and women.

Her localities are sections of hard-pushing music alternating stress-free interludes of a mossy string pasture made to glitter by harp, piano and percussion, or made to sing by short melodic solos from English horn, trumpet, flute and a violin so soft and high you are not always sure it is actually playing or part of your imagining.

For her part, Lafourcade — who has a pure, focused soprano and who is conservative with vocal embellishment or emphasis — allowed every phrase to be sung as if it were the heart of the matter, not to be messed with, whether reflective (which she was often), defiant (also often) or more danceable (less often, which made the numbers all the more effective).

Most of her songs, like the opening "Mexicana Hermosa," came from her new album, "Musas," or the previous "Hasta la Raíz." The orchestral arrangements by Ljova and Mario Santos, created for the concert, were far more integral to the performances than is often the case, so much so, in fact, that the orchestra made Lafourcade's impressive five-member band irrelevant.

The band became very relevant after intermission. But here too it had competition. Lafourcade began the set solo, accompanying herself on guitar, with the well known folk song "Cucurrucucu," sung with a transforming intimacy. There was subtle point to other numbers, such as "Lo que Construimos" (What We Build) and, at the end, "Para que Sufrir" (Why We Suffer). That point is the reason, the need and the spirit to move on. What we build will always one day be over. Why suffer when there is no need?

The challenge of CDMX — as it moves over the weekend through Mexico's film and dance music and ends Tuesday with a Green Umbrella concert of new music by young Mexican composers — will be to live up to Lafourcade's "Derecho de Nacimiento," to create a song to be able to exist.

"I claim freedom of thought," she sang, turning comradely to Dudamel, "because it is a birthright."

Mark Swed 13/10/2017

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