

An Electrified Concerto Zaps Violin Tradition With Cosmic Fantasy

SEATTLE — It's been nearly a year since Thomas Dausgaard's abrupt departure as the Seattle Symphony's music director, but the projects initiated under his tenure and delayed by the pandemic continue to make their way to the Benaroya Hall stage. The latest of these is *Antiphaser*, a concerto for electric violin and orchestra by the Mexican composer Enrico Chapela. Trading his 1709 "Scotta" Stradivari for an electronically amplified instrument, Pekka Kuusisto joined the orchestra to perform the world premiere under the baton of Andrew Litton on Nov. 3.

Chapela, who was born in 1974 in Mexico City and currently directs the Center for Research and Musical Studies there, began his musical career as a guitarist. He played in a heavy metal band before shifting his attention to composition in his mid-20s and quickly made up for lost time with a series of instrumental works that comfortably combine the driving energy of rock music and Minimalist gestures with adventurous electronic soundscapes. Chapela scored his first concert hall success in 2003 with the brief, soccer-match-inspired symphonic poem *Inguesu* and has been commissioned by ensembles from across the Americas and Europe.

Composed in 2019-20 on a co-commission from the Seattle Symphony and BBC Radio 3, *Antiphaser* was originally scheduled to be premiered by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Dausgaard in April 2020. Chapela's electric violin concerto adds to a subset of his work inspired by natural phenomena and astronomy, from the terrifying power of volcanoes (*Piroklasta*, 2014) to the rare neutron stars that produce the largest magnetic fields in the universe (the impulse underlying his 2011 concerto for electric cello, *MAGNETAR*).

The title *Antiphaser* is a play on words referring both to the electronic manipulation of sound via digital phasing — Chapela himself took part in the performance from an onstage control table, adjusting sonic input and output — and to the complementarity of phases of the moon and earth when viewed from each other's perspective. An additional, teasing allusion to the signature phasing technique of early Steve Reich may or may not be intended. Chapela adds a sci-fi twist to his programmatic scheme, which traces the astronomical facts of a synodic cycle. He imagines how the earth would appear to moon dwellers situated at the lunar equator vis-à-vis the familiar view of the moon's shifting phases from our blue dot: subjective experience superimposed on objective reality.

In his note about the work, the composer writes: "Planetary phases are complementary to lunar ones; if the world wanes, the satellite waxes; if the blue is full, the silver is new. When the Earth casts her shadow over the Moon, Earthlings witness a lunar eclipse whereas Lunarians attend to a solar one. At totality, solar rays bend through Earth's atmosphere coating the full face of the Moon with a gloomy red glow, which is seen at the near side as a fiery halo engulfing the darkened planet. This annular twilight comprises every daybreak or nightfall at the blue horizon. Earthlings inside the gloom zone can see the bloody moon rising at dawn, or setting at dusk."

If Chapela's concept determines the formal design of his four-movement concerto, *Antiphaser* can be appreciated on its own, purely musical terms — quite apart from his colorful description mapping out the mutual perspectives from our planet and its satellite. Lasting around 24 minutes, with no breaks between movements, the piece impressed this listener as a rivetingly fresh take on the solo concerto genre that persuasively combines its disparate influences into a coherent whole. And, in Kuusisto's vivid interpretation, it was a lot of fun.

Chapela exploits the large cast list of *dramatis personae* at the disposal of the amplified, digitally manipulated violin, from raspily wiry scratchings to spaced-out phrasing using a wah-wah pedal (indicated as “arco con wa wa”). Even the most obvious hallmarks of the acoustic instrument become defamiliarized and capable of surprise, as in an extended passage in the first movement of *pizzicati* that seemed to precipitate like a hailstorm, fissioning into multiple layers through delay effects. The technology isn't mere gimmickry; it adds enchantingly to the expressive effect.

Kuusisto sustained a magnetic presence, playing rapid-fire figures with aplomb for long stretches. The soloist is almost constantly active throughout the concerto, with just a few brief passages of respite. Chapela requires frequent reexamination of previously heard material, and Kuusisto's thoroughly engaged playing kept mining it for new angles and effects.

Antiphaser makes economic use of a few basic ideas. Using the drums as another protagonist, Chapela fuses the propulsive energy of rock with the kind of perpetual-motion dynamism that animates the fast movements of a Baroque concerto. In one passage, a repeated harmonic sequence, closely folded in on itself, evokes the obsessiveness of the Renaissance musical trope, *La folia*.

On top of this are frankly old-fashioned gestures from the Romantic violin concerto, from arpeggiated virtuoso passagework to soulfully meditative lyricism in the slower music of the second movement (earth waning/moon waxing); indeed, for all its experimental outlook, *Antiphaser* contains plenty of traits from the conventional genre. When stripped of its electronic apparatus, the piece culminates in a rousing convergence on *A major*.

But there's nothing hackneyed in Chapela's tautly constructed composition. I especially admired his reworking of the fast-slow-fast concerto archetype into an intriguing four-part symmetry in keeping with the complementary phases, giving a new perspective to the principle of recapitulation. His treatment of the orchestra worked especially well with the violin's amplified tonal colors: tendrilled woodwind figures and glissando harmonies from the strings provided a mysterious aura, while snarling brass accents established an atmosphere of combined fear and excitement.

Kuusisto's expressions conveyed a sense of wonder and delight at the sound worlds he conjured — with a hint, perhaps, of a mischievous, mad scientist at work — and the Seattle Symphony players seemed to enjoy the collaboration. Litton, in conjunction with Chapela's constant micro-adjustments of the electronic processing, sensitively calibrated the orchestral forces. The conductor's skillful navigation of *Antiphaser's* metrical shifts and thrilling cross-rhythms enhanced the overall dramatic thrust of this powerful score.

In this season of one guest conductor following another — the formal search committee for Dausgaard's replacement was only recently launched — Alexander Shelley had originally been slated to conduct the program. Litton stepped in at the last minute when difficulties in visa processing made it impossible for Shelley to appear. This is the first time I've heard Litton conduct the Seattle Symphony, but he gave an easeful impression of working with familiar colleagues.

Music by Ravel and Debussy framed the Chapela premiere. *La mer* was offered instead of the originally programmed finale (an orchestration of Ravel's Piano Trio by Yan Pascal Tortelier), thus making the rest

of the evening list more to the Debussy side. And that's where Litton's strengths seemed most evident. His account of Ravel's La valse at the start of the concert had much to admire, with an intriguingly lucid focus on the opening murmurings from the lower depths, but it didn't establish a convincing sense of the dissolution toward which the composer subversively builds.

By contrast, Litton elicited consistently inspired playing in the two Debussy works that occupied the second half of the program. Following Antiphase's at times apocalyptic soundscape, Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune served as a serene chaser filled with the "sun-consumed" delights envisioned in Mallarmé's poem. Like a film's establishing shot, Demarre McGill's gorgeously phrased introductory flute solo opened the door into Debussy's encompassing dreamscape. Litton's gentle, patient pacing and exquisite textural balancing suggested not so much an erotic fantasy enjoyed by the faun as a blissful vision of biophilia as described by the late Edward O. Wilson.

Similarly, his interpretation of La mer beckoned with tints and colors that often lie submerged, rendering the dimensionality of Debussy's well-known score with ear-opening clarity. If the sweeping drama in the wind-and-waves dialogue was toned down a tad, Litton nevertheless proved himself an expert storyteller with his command of the proportions of these "symphonic sketches for orchestra."

The performance may be accessed through Nov. 16 on the Seattle Symphony's streaming platform here by signing up for a free trial.

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https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2022/11/07/electrified-concerto-zaps-violin-tradition-with-cosmic-fantasy/?fbclid=IwAR3eOOeoKmM2K4DfKCoA7_unotULYveyvMv7b-s5j_KnMkDza84L9-MDoOE