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New Century starts a farewell to artistic director

By **Joshua Kosman** Updated 1:19 pm, Wednesday, May 17, 2017



Violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, left, plays violin while also directing the New Century Chamber Orchestra during a rehearsal at Zellerbach Hall in San Francisco on March 15.

One of the great achievements of Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg's nine years as artistic director of the New Century Chamber Orchestra has been the Featured Composer program she instituted immediately after arriving on the scene in 2008. Each season the ensemble has thrown a spotlight on a chosen composer, whose work ran through the schedule and culminated in a commissioned premiere.

Now Salerno-Sonnenberg is moving on, and the orchestra's three-night series of farewell concerts began

on Tuesday, May 16, with a retrospective look at that commissioning program. It was surely the right place to start.

Salerno-Sonnenberg's picks over the years have encompassed both established names, such as Pulitzer Prize winners Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and William Bolcom, and comparative up-and-comers such as Lera Auerbach and Derek Bermel. If a curmudgeonly observer might have wished for a little more stylistic range — the

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composers in question came almost exclusively from a fastidiously respectable, middle-of-the-road slice of the spectrum — there's no question that the program has broadened the repertoire available to ensembles like New Century.

Tuesday's program in Herbst Theatre offered a sampler of that legacy, but it was a slender one. The orchestra offered a medley of eight short selections from the chosen composers, but in only a few cases were they the commissioned works.

Perhaps it's just a coincidence that those were the most rewarding extracts on the program. The opening movement of Auerbach's "Memoria de la Luz," which the orchestra premiered in 2013, cast a luxuriant, hazy glow of string sonorities, and segued beautifully into the minimalist lullaby of "Gliding Over Algiers," from Bermel's 2015 "Murmurations."

Clarice Assad has been a stalwart presence throughout Salerno-Sonnenberg's tenure — she was the first composer to be selected for highlighting, and she continued over the years to contribute a wealth of ingenious arrangements of other music for the ensemble. A movement from her "Impressions" sent a simple theme winningly around the orchestra, giving each instrumental section a chance to interpret it in a different way.

Also on the program was music by Jennifer Higdon (the exuberantly zippy "To the Point") and Mark O'Connor ("Song of the Liberty Bell," which was written as the soundtrack for a PBS documentary and adheres to the conventions of that genre). Zwilich's drab "Prologue and Variations" began the evening, and two of Bolcom's familiar piano rags, arranged for string orchestra, concluded it in high spirits.

To flesh out the proceedings a little, Salerno-Sonnenberg was joined onstage by New Century's Executive Director Philip Wilder, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Dean and Provost Kate Sheeran, and Alecia Lawyer, the artistic and organizational dynamo behind Houston's River Oaks Chamber Orchestra for a little panel discussion. All agreed that commissioning new works was a good thing, and there were no objections.

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New Century Chamber Orchestra: 8 p.m. Thursday, May 18, and Saturday, May 20. \$29-\$61.
Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. (415) 392-4400, www.ncco.org

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