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SUNDAY, JUNE 18, 2017

Clarice Assad's Delightfully Ingenious Approach to the Concerto

Last night in the Concert Hall of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the Bay Area Rainbow Symphony (BARS) concluded its ninth season with an imaginative program blending old and new. The high point of the evening came from a visit by Clarice Assad in her "triple threat" capacity as composer, pianist, and vocalist. Led by Music Director Dawn Harms, BARS performed Assad's 2010 "Scattered," described as "the world's first scat singing concerto in the history of music."

For those unfamiliar with the concept, scat singing is an approach to vocal jazz that endows the vocalist with the same capacities for wildly adventurous improvisation that one encounters among instrumentalists. Jazz theorist Paul Berliner has suggested that instrumentalists would often work out what they would play by singing it first. Vocalists may have picked up on this technique and then dropped the instruments out of the equation.

However, Assad performed the solo work for "Scattered" seated at a piano keyboard. In many respects the piece was a double concerto for both piano and voice, although she rarely (if ever) engaged in much vocalizing while playing at the same time. Instead, piano and voice each had their own thematic building blocks based on their respective affordances of sound production. Assad then assembled those blocks into a multicolored foreground presented against the bold and sharp colors of her approach to instrumentation within the background ensemble. All this was then framed in a three-movement architecture that would have been as easily grasped by the likes of Johann Sebastian Bach as by a contemporary audience.

Nevertheless, basic description cannot do justice to the wild ride

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

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through the execution of Assad's concerto. Her scatting took in one of the broadest approaches to the diversity of vocal sonorities, working with not only different timbres of vowel tones but also an imaginatively rhythmic approach to consonants (often in the absence of any of those vowels). The solo piano work often tended to emerge to balance a framework of call-and-response, even if it was not always clear who was responding to whom. The whole experience could be enjoyed just for the fun of it, while those more familiar with the history of jazz improvisation could recognize inspirations from the past and Assad's originality in thrusting them into the immediate present.

Assad then followed her concerto with a "programmed encore." She played her 2011 "The Last Song" for piano and orchestra. Rhetorically, this was a matter of restoring calm after the storm; and Assad's approach to the lyrical was as absorbing as had been the imaginative precision of her scatting. This was far from "the usual bill-of-fare" for an orchestra concert; but the coupling of these two pieces made for a highly satisfying listening experience, all based on a "first contact" experience rather than the usual excursion into familiar repertoire.

Indeed, the intermission was followed by an equally absorbing departure from that "usual excursion." "Barbaric Passages" was a duet by Joe W. Moore, III for two percussionists. Both Christian Foster Howes and Alapaki Yee worked with a diversity of drums, and both of them were equipped with mallets for sharing a single marimba. The performers provided a program note in which they compared the interactions in the score with the tale of Beauty and the Beast.

My own approach to listening had less to do with hanging the music on a narrative and more with just exploring the different approaches to give-and-take. Those approaches took in a wide diversity ranging from the imitative to the argumentative. Both Howes and Yee were clearly absorbed in the demanding technical requirements, but neither of them lacked the ability to bring expressive rhetoric to their approaches to execution. Percussion-only music still has its place in the sun; and Moore definitely deserves his place alongside past masters of the genre.

The more traditional side of the program was rooted firmly in the nineteenth century. It began with Gioachino Rossini's overture for his *La gazza ladra* opera in two acts and then continued with the tenth (in B minor) of Felix Mendelssohn's string symphonies. Stylistically, these were very different pieces. However, rhetorically, both involved

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building to a conclusion through a gradual crescendo sustained over the final passages in the score. Harms' command of that crescendo was thoroughly convincing in both of the sharply different contexts of these two pieces.

The comic nature of Rossini's overture was complemented at the end of the program by "Boler-uh-o." This amounted to a clown show by Johannes Mager during which he spent almost all of the time playing a tuba while climbing over seats in the audience area, all while the orchestra is gamely trying to play Maurice Ravel's "Bolero." This physical approach to comedy reminded me of when I used to watch the work of Lotte Goslar, who recruited highly-trained dancers as members of her clown troupe. (I came to know the group through its appearances at dance festivals.) Mager had Goslar's crazy-like-a-fox demeanor; and "Boler-uh-o" provided a fun conclusion to an evening of many offerings.

The only weak spot came just before Mager with Laura Karpman's "Siren Songs." This consisted of three movements, each based on text from the poetry of Amy Gerstler and all inspired by Diana Nyad's historic swim from Cuba to Florida. Gerstler's texts were not set to music. However, they were read before each movement and the words then appeared in video imagery that accompanied the music. Unfortunately, the imagery was so vivid and the texts were so tedious that few cognitive cycles were left to deal with the music itself. In the highly imaginative context of last night's programming, the banality of "Siren Songs" came off as feeling uncomfortably out of place.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 8:06 AM 

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