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NY Phil/Gilbert/Midori, Avery Fisher Hall, New York – review

By Martin Bernheimer

Three concise orchestral adventures, all recently composed and brilliantly performed

The festival labelled NY Phil Biennial rumbled onward and, for the most part, upward on Thursday with three concise orchestral adventures, all brilliantly performed under the resident maestro-impresario Alan Gilbert.

First came *Dark Sand, Sifting Light* by Julia Adolphe, age 26. A neat fusion of shimmering textures and cataclysmic climaxes, it demonstrates mastery of dynamic as well as harmonic complexity. The score is good enough to make one overlook the precious apologia that came with it, something about “a piano playing in the distance, overheard through an open apartment window”.

Peter Eötvös’s *DoReMi*, composed two years ago and already heard at the BBC Proms, toys with mock-innocence as defined by classroom clichés. Crucially, it also salutes the virtuosa for whom it was created, Midori.

This wailing expedition first surveys jolly if edgy dissonances, then turns deceptively calm. The violinist must dig into the jagged lines with ferocious, finger-breaking intensity. Marvellous Midori did that. In the convoluted, exhaustive process, she actually managed to make the impossible seem merely difficult.

Christopher Rouse’s Symphony No. 4, a Philharmonic commission, begins as a big-boned essay in clashing, smashing crashes. Nothing subtle here. Eventually, the bombast turns nearly elegiac, in the exalted manner of wrong-note romanticism. The first half is called “Felice”, the second “Doloroso”. At least one listener preferred “Doloroso”.

Rouse, not incidentally, provided a rather coy annotation regarding his subject matter: “While I did have a particular meaning in mind when composing my symphony, I prefer to keep it to myself.” Oh. Thanks.

In the middle of the concert, a Philharmonic official took the stage to voice extended tributes to members of the orchestra celebrating anniversaries and/or retirement, some of whom volunteered speeches. Place of prominence went to the fine outgoing concertmaster, Glenn Dicterow. At one point the audience was commanded to give the players a standing ovation. Sometimes, even in sophisticated New York, the music-making is not allowed to speak for itself.



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