

Review A beautiful premiere and some glorious Mahler from L.A. Chamber Orchestra



Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's weekend program included a new piece written by Julia Adolphe, left, and an exquisite performance by mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke. (Martin Chalifour; Dario Acosta)

By **Richard S. Ginell**

MARCH 19, 2017, 4:45 PM

Jeffrey Kahane tried to touch several bases Saturday night at the Alex Theatre in Glendale as his last season as music director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra nears its end. There were three distinctly different segments — and not the usual overture-concerto-symphony game.

First up was the latest world premiere in LACO's Sound Investment program of commissioned work. This one came from Julia Adolphe (born 1988), a doctoral student at the USC Thornton School of Music who has had her music played by the New York Philharmonic.

In the pre-concert talk, Adolphe said her new 13-minute piece, “Shiver and Bloom,” refers to a division between a high-shivering world of high strings, flute and clarinet and a low-blooming world of low strings, bassoon and horn that is “striving upwards.” The two worlds are supposed to meld “into a more holistic unity” as the piece evolves, yet what I perceived on a first hearing is a sense of impending gloom, leading to an inconclusive fade. Nevertheless, the piece is beautifully scored for 20 instruments, particularly the gauzy opening wash of bitonal strings with delicate harp, violin and flute solos curling over them.

The second segment belonged to the marvelous mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, known for her involvement with contemporary music and recently, her complete identification with Mahler. Over the past year, I’ve heard her in some extraordinary live performances of Mahler song cycles with Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony, and she brought a little bit of that magic down south with three songs from “Rückert-Lieder.” With her rock-solid, richly textured mezzo, Cooke pointed out the words in “Blicke mir Nicht in die Lieder,” rose gloriously in “Liebst du um Schönheit” and conveyed the quiet, trance-like intensity of “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” with exquisite control.

LACO hasn’t played much Mahler in the past (in fairness, how many chamber orchestras do?), and it didn’t always flow naturally. But the orchestra certainly knew how to put the zip behind Cooke’s room-filling dramatics in “Deh, per questo istante solo” from Mozart’s “La clemenza di Tito,” and singer and orchestra also did well with “As with rosy steps the morn” from Handel’s “Theodora.”

Part Three, far lengthier than the rest of the concert, was another bout with the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2, which the LA Phil performed only three weeks ago. It’s not the sort of repertoire you would associate with a chamber orchestra, although Kahane tried to justify it by claiming that Brahms entrusted the premiere of his Symphony No. 4 to the same-sized orchestra (49 players) that Kahane was using. The performance, leaner strings and all, didn’t produce any revelations, with soloist Jon Kimura Parker gradually coming to terms with a thin-sounding, sometimes clattery Steinway.

A fun surprise encore came at the end. Kahane joined Kimura Parker at the keyboard, and they battered out Brahms’s Hungarian Dance No. 6 with spark, abandon and deliciously exaggerated rubatos.

[SIGN UP for the free Essential Arts & Culture newsletter »](#)

Follow The Times’ arts team [@culturemonster](#).

ALSO

[Cameron Carpenter unleashes his International Touring Organ at CAP UCLA](#)

In a startling coup, New York lures L.A. Phil chief Deborah Borda

L.A. Phil President Deborah Borda's departure sends arts world spinning

Rachel Barton Pine on her comeback and the advice she got from Itzhak Perlman

Copyright © 2017, Los Angeles Times

This article is related to: [USC](#)