



MUSIC | MUSIC REVIEW

A Work Is Rushed to a Debut, by Design

Christopher Rouse and EarShot Premieres From Philharmonic

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI JUNE 6, 2014

The work that opened the New York Philharmonic's concert on Thursday night at Avery Fisher Hall was selected for performance only two days earlier. There was not even time to list it in the program.

But, as the conductor Alan Gilbert explained to the audience, this was a special occasion. As part of the ambitious 11-day NY Phil Biennial, the Philharmonic participated in EarShot, a program administered by the American Composers Orchestra to help ensembles do open readings of new works by emerging composers. Some 400 scores were submitted to the Philharmonic; six received readings on Tuesday; three were chosen for premieres by the Philharmonic during the last three nights of the Biennial.

On Thursday the first of these was performed: "Dark Sand, Sifting Light," by Julia Adolphe, 26, a native New Yorker in the doctoral program at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music. Lasting about nine minutes, this work is a colorful, mercurial, deftly orchestrated piece.

But it was not the only news on Thursday. The adventurous program ended with the premiere of Christopher Rouse's Symphony No. 4, an intriguing 20-minute work structured in two connected movements of vastly contrasting character: the first bustling and seemingly cheerful, the second grim and despairing. There was also the New York premiere of Peter Eotvos's eclectic "DoReMi," Violin Concerto No. 2, with Midori as soloist.

And this was also the night that the Philharmonic acknowledged players who have reached milestone anniversaries or are retiring at the end of the season.

In a composer's note, Ms. Adolphe explains that in "Dark Sand, Sifting Light," she imagines someone overhearing a piano playing in the distance "through an open apartment window." The listener starts to daydream; "her mind wanders, and the music transforms."

The piece begins with almost inaudible scratching, rustling sounds. Instruments slowly join in, including a pensive solo violin. From a piano placed in the rear of the stage come captivating fragments: skittish bursts of notes, like bits of a Pointillist piano piece or, at times, Impressionist filigree. Sustained notes try to coalesce into a theme. Now and then the piano rests, or wants to, on a series of placid chords.

The piano music activates the orchestra, which takes off in episodes of lush strings, quizzical bursts of winds and brass and fidgety rhythmic riffs. Ms. Adolphe looked understandably elated when she came onstage for a bow. Most composers have a little more notice before a Philharmonic premiere.

Mr. Eotvos, 70, who considers himself part of Hungary's rich musical tradition, wrote his concerto for Midori; its title, "DoReMi," plays with the syllables of her name. Some of its motifs are based on the diatonic "do, re, mi" scale tones, but little about this 30-minute concerto in three connected parts seems elementary.

The most striking quality is its eclectic musical language. Mr. Eotvos draws from myriad styles and inspirations: mellow jazz chords in the brass and strings; darting lines like passages of Schoenberg; rhythmically driving episodes with gnarly tunes and pungent chords, like something out of folkloric Bartok. But somehow he fashions the components into music that speaks in an authentic, quirky voice.

The violin writing is episodic, all fits and starts, with perpetual-motion passages and bittersweet melodic flights, though nothing dwells too long in this restless concerto. Midori played with plush tone, myriad colorings and command. At one point there is a fraught cadenza, joined by a solo viola and, eventually, a harp. The orchestration over all is rich and thick, so following the composer's request, the solo violin was lightly amplified for proper balance.

This spring has been momentous for Mr. Rouse, the Philharmonic's composer in residence. His impressive "Requiem" had its recent premiere, conducted by Mr. Gilbert, at Carnegie Hall.

The first movement of Mr. Rouse's Symphony No. 4 is marked "Felice," and the music is indeed felicitous. There are bustling rhythmic figurations and whole passages built from ascending, sputtering scale motifs. After a while the cheerful energy becomes tiresome. Enough, already! What is he up to? The music becomes bogged down with intricacy, jagged phrases and weighty harmonies. The first movement seems to decompress, or deflate.

The second movement, marked "Doloroso," becomes ominous, which could have sounded melodramatic and obvious. But Mr. Rouse explores the dark side with restraint and mystery. The piece does not end so much as give up, in a final, enigmatic gesture.

Before the Rouse performance, Gary W. Parr, the orchestra's chairman, hosted a ceremony onstage for the players being honored. Both Sandra Church, associate principal flute, and Sharon Yamada, violin, were saluted for their 25th anniversaries with the Philharmonic. Two veterans who are married to each other are retiring: Marc Ginsberg, principal of the second violin group, after 44 years; and Judith Ginsberg, violin, after 30 years. Philip Smith, principal trumpet, is retiring after 36 years.

There has been much talk about the retirement of Glenn Dicterow, the Philharmonic's longest-serving concertmaster, who is stepping down after 34 years. Somehow another coming violin retirement has received less attention, though it affects Mr. Gilbert personally. His mother, the respected violinist Yoko Takebe, is leaving after 35 years. She will join Mr. Gilbert's father, Michael Gilbert, also a longtime Philharmonic violinist, in retirement.

What wild things might we expect from the adventurous Alan Gilbert now that he will no longer have parental oversight among the players?

This program, with a new work by Max Grafe in place of Julia Adolphe's piece, will be presented by the New York Philharmonic on Saturday evening at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; 212-875-5656, nyphil.org.

A version of this review appears in print on June 7, 2014, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Work Is Rushed to a Debut, by Design.