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Three compelling premieres make for inspired Philharmonic “Biennial” program

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Midori performed the New York premiere of Peter Eötvös’s “DoReMi” with Alan Gilbert and the New York Philharmonic Thursday night.

An hour and a half of new music during the regular season might be a tough sell, but such programming has been de rigueur during the Philharmonic’s first Biennial. Alan Gilbert’s latest project scored a major coup Thursday night in one of the Philharmonic’s most rewarding concerts of the year.

The name on this evening’s marquee was Christopher Rouse, whose Fourth Symphony was receiving its world premiere. It is a surprisingly short work, two movements performed without pause, running just twenty minutes.

The first of the two movements is very much out of character for Rouse—Marked “Felice,” it is playful and bright, opening with billowing, rippling waves of strings. As it moves along, the music seems to have a spring in its step, but there is something—perhaps intentionally—hollow about it. Missing from the revelry of the music is a sense of sincere joy.

The hush of the second movement, “Doloroso,” comes suddenly, and persists for its duration. Its character is not oppressive or aggrieved, exactly, but there is a powerful emptiness in the restrained writing. Loneliness seems a major theme of the piece, as a number of instruments have solos, brief but affecting. Deep groaning in the basses and brass combine while violins wander down from cold, steely heights. After the first movement’s grinning aspect, this music is immediately sobering.

The Doloroso ends almost abruptly, cut off. And while its brevity is certainly not a bad thing in itself, it felt at the end of the symphony that a great deal had been left unsaid, with material and territory not explored. Maybe it’s unfair, but at this point, after all that Rouse has given us over the years, one wants a little more than we get in his Fourth Symphony, which feels like a work in progress.

The title of Peter Eötvös’s *DoReMi*, Gilbert told us, was partly inspired by the name of the violinist who would give the piece its New York premiere, the Japanese superstar Midori. It is in many ways a playful piece, with energetic rhythms and glittering percussion.

But this concerto is dark as well. In three continuous movements it traverses relatively narrow aesthetic and textural space; its writing is on the thin side, subduing the strings and making little use of brass in favor of the near constant chattering of pitched percussion. Eötvös seems in the piece to be stitching together small ideas into a whole. As its title implies, *DoReMi* is built on simplicity, not literally a fantasia on three notes, but an unraveling and interweaving of short phrases.

The piece’s variety comes from its shifts in energy level, shifts that Midori followed closely. She played with superb intensity and with much more volume than we’ve often heard from her in the past. (The Philharmonic confirmed Friday that the violinist was “lightly amplified” at the request of the composer.) There was considerable grit in her playing, mostly in the middle movement, where she emphasized the harshness of the writing by pushing her bow up right against the bridge.

The concert had a memorable opener, *Dark Sand, Sifting Light* by New York native Julia Adolphe. The piece was one of six “finalists” played in the Philharmonic’s “EarShot” listening session on Tuesday, a partnership with the American Composers Orchestra.

Adolphe writes tart harmonies and flowing melodies. Her lines are easy to follow, and moreover invite the audience to be led along. The piece opens with hushed, tinkling percussion, and the music is initially carried by an eerie emptiness in piano. But the piece grows and blossoms into rich, full texture. Adolphe, only twenty-six, shows not only youthful vigor and artistic passion in *Dark Sand*, but startling refinement, as well. Her orchestration is magnificent—she writes with wonderful confidence for every section, and balances her instrumentation into a finely-weaved sonority. As in the other two pieces, the Philharmonic’s lockstep ensemble was impressive, especially given the paucity of rehearsal time.

In terms of both its weight and its length, *Dark Sand* was well-situated at the start. It is ideally suited as a concert overture, and that is not meant as a slight. It has the valuable property—somewhat unusual among short contemporary pieces—of really being able to warm an audience up. As an added bonus, *Dark Sand* included a brief but lovely solo for Concertmaster Glenn Dicterow, who received a healthy cheer during a ceremony for retiring musicians.

The Rouse and Eötvös works will be performed again 8 p.m. Saturday, along with Max Grafe’s *Bismuth: Variations for Orchestra*. The third “EarShot” selection, Andrew McManus’s *Strobe*, will be performed 8 p.m. tonight, along with Eliot Carter’s *Instances* and Matthias Pintscher’s *Reflections on Narcissus*, with Alisa Weilerstein. Matthias Pintscher conducts. nyphil.org (<http://nyphil.org>).

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