



MUSIC

Young Composers Catch the Philharmonic's Ear

By MICHAEL COOPER JUNE 4, 2014

It was a bit like a reality television show called “The Composer,” or “Philharmonic Idol,” or perhaps just “Survivor.” After more than 400 composers ranging in age from 9 to 84 had submitted their scores, six finalists were chosen to come to Avery Fisher Hall to hear the New York Philharmonic play their pieces.

It was an all-too-rare opportunity to hear their work brought to life by a leading orchestra. But an even bigger prize loomed: After the read-throughs, the Philharmonic selected works by three of them to play at concerts this week, starting on Thursday, as some of the newest music in its 11-day new music festival, the NY Phil Biennial.

Some artists rarely, if ever, get the chance to experience their works as they envision them. Screenwriters may toil for years without seeing their words transferred from the page to the screen. Experimental architects may never get past the blueprint stage. Being a composer of orchestral music can be like that, too, with scores more often imagined than actually heard.

“There are always surprises, even with chamber music,” Julia Adolphe, 26, said after hearing the Philharmonic play her first orchestra piece. “But I think they’re equally compelling. When you hear something that’s exactly how you wanted it to be, and it fulfills what you were expecting, and when you hear something that’s a complete surprise, that surprises you in a beautiful way. Of course, when it surprises you in an ‘Oh, I didn’t want it to sound like that’ way, that’s less exciting. But that happens, too.”

Ms. Adolphe was the first to hear her piece played on Tuesday, when the Philharmonic turned its rehearsal into a new music reading.

Avery Fisher Hall was mostly empty. Ms. Adolphe took a seat in the sixth

row, with Steven Mackey, one of several established contemporary composers serving as mentors to the young finalists, beside her, following the score of her piece, "Dark Sand, Sifting Light."

Onstage, the players were dressed in the casual-Friday clothes they favor for rehearsals, not the formal wear they put on for performances. Alan Gilbert, the Philharmonic's music director, was on the podium. He dived right into the piece, stopping here and there to give a little direction. Ms. Adolphe's head nodded, slightly, to the rhythms.

It went well. That afternoon, she learned that her piece has been selected to receive its premiere on Thursday night at Avery Fisher, in a program conducted by Mr. Gilbert that will also feature the world premiere of Christopher Rouse's Symphony No. 4.

A little later, Max Grafe, a 25-year-old doctoral student at Juilliard, took his place in the sixth row and heard the Philharmonic play his "Bismuth: Variations for Orchestra." At one point, Mr. Gilbert asked the players to delay some crescendos, "so they really snap." When it was over, he turned to ask Mr. Grafe, "Anything you want to ask for?"

Mr. Grafe replied, "It was all good from here."

His piece will have its Philharmonic premiere on Saturday night.

The third piece, "Strobe," by Andrew McManus, 29, will receive its premiere on Friday night, on a program that will feature Matthias Pintscher conducting the New York premiere of his own work "Reflections on Narcissus." After the reading on Tuesday, Mr. McManus said that there had been few surprises hearing the piece played live "aside from the feeling of, 'Oh my God, the New York Philharmonic is playing this piece.'"

The process was the fruit of a collaboration between the Philharmonic and EarShot, a program administered by the American Composers Orchestra that works to help orchestras around the country find young and emerging composers. In addition to getting the works played by ensembles, EarShot works to provide useful feedback.

Michael Geller, the president of the composers orchestra, asked the Philharmonic players to fill out forms offering constructive criticism and suggestions.

"We call it nuts and bolts," he explained later. "We're looking for: What are

the things that in the score, or the part, that are preventing the best possible execution? Sometimes, it's the way something is expressed; sometimes, there's some kind of a technical issue. It could be anything from 'They didn't allow me enough time to put that mute in,' or sometimes it's string articulation questions."

Mentors for the young finalists — including Mr. Rouse, Derek Bermel and Robert Beaser — made a work station for themselves during the reading in the 12th row, spreading the scores out on a long plank balanced on seat backs.

Mr. Gilbert, who did the reading in the midst of a fast-paced week in which the orchestra has had to digest, rehearse and play a great deal of new music for the Biennial, said afterward that he was attracted by the opportunity to present music by composers in various stages of their careers. "For the Philharmonic to do this is a real statement," he said.

He said that he had been struck by the degree to which he and Mr. Pintscher, who helped him select the finalists, had been in accord on the pieces they had chosen. "I made a point not to look at résumés and bios and recommendations and things, because I just wanted to go straight to the scores," he said.

The thrill of being chosen soon gave way to the practicalities of getting the works performed in the next few days. After hearing their pieces and getting feedback from the Philharmonic's players, the young composers met with Lawrence Tarlow, the Philharmonic's principal librarian, and were told that they had until 9 Wednesday morning to get in any last-minute corrections or changes to their scores.

"Are we supposed to email the parts?" Ms. Adolphe asked.

The sooner, the better, Mr. Tarlow told them. "If you finish at 2 in the morning or whenever," he said, "send it in."

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