

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

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MUSIC REVIEW

Live: Joana Carneiro and Ursula Oppens with the L.A. Philharmonic
The L.A. Phil catches up with Carter and adds new works by Frank and Meltzer.

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Elliott Carter finished "Dialogues," for piano and chamber orchestra, in 2003, shortly before his 95th birthday. This is obviously a late piano concerto. But it doesn't appear to be a last piano concerto. Carter is busy at work on "Interventions" for piano and orchestra, and he plans to celebrate his 100th birthday on Dec. 11 at Carnegie Hall, when the Boston Symphony is scheduled to give the New York premiere of "Interventions" with Daniel Barenboim as soloist.

Keeping up with Carter is no simple matter. He writes and writes. New York has become Carter Central. Lately James Levine's BSO has had practically a premiere (or even two) a season. But like most of America, Los Angeles has fallen hopelessly behind in Carteriana.

Still, the Los Angeles Philharmonic managed an important contribution to the Carter year Tuesday night when its New Music Group got around to "Dialogues." As part of a Green Umbrella program at Walt Disney Concert Hall, the concerto was preceded by premieres of two compelling works by emerging American composers several generations removed from the soon-to-be-centenarian.



TWO PLAYERS: Assistant conductor Joana Carneiro with pianist Ursula Oppens during the L.A. Philharmonic's Green Umbrella program Tuesday at Walt Disney Concert Hall. Oppens was the soloist for Carter's "Dialogues" and Meltzer's "Privacy." Lori Shepler/Los Angeles Times

"Dialogues" lasts a little over 13 minutes and is full of striking incident. In his program note, the composer likens the score to a conversation between soloist and orchestra. I'd say it's more like a brilliant orator arguing with, cajoling and outwitting a noisy citizenry.

Pianist Ursula Oppens, one of the most persuasive of Carter performers, was the commanding soloist. The musical talk, back and forth, is in short sentences. An English horn has the opening line, but the piano jumps in and finishes the thought. Strings might try to interrupt, but the piano simply picks up where it left off. There are delicate passages when chords are exchanged between piano and orchestra, but even they turn out to be the piano's way of disarming its opponent.

If the dialogue seemed one-sided Tuesday, part of the reason was that **Oppens gave every phrase drama and clear definition.** The ensemble knew its lines and, although vibrantly led by Philharmonic assistant conductor Joana Carneiro, sounded as if it had yet to get into full character.

Oppens was also the soloist in Harold Meltzer's "Privacy, a Piano Concerto With Winds, Brass and Percussion," which the Philharmonic commissioned for the occasion. Meltzer was born in 1966 and

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is, like Carter, a New Yorker. And, despite his fondness for up-to-date rhythmic grooves, he can be something of a contrarian Carterian himself.

Meltzer's headstrong concerto, though, is not particularly argumentative. **The piano sets off, and once started, doesn't stop for a dozen minutes. The orchestra tries to slow the soloist down, steps on her feet, throws her off balance, but she speeds along with a purpose and nothing can halt her. Oppens' virtuosity, and Carneiro's enthusiasm, sold the score.**

Gabriella Lena Frank's "New Andean Songs," also a Philharmonic commission (and one of the scores written in memory of Sue Knussen, the orchestra's late education director) comes from a very different geography and sensibility. A Berkeley-ite born in 1972, Frank rejoices in her mixed genes -- Peruvian, Chinese and Lithuanian. The Latin side, though, dominates in this cycle for two singers, two pianos and two percussionists.

Her texts are indigenous Peruvian poetry full of fantastical and haunting imagery: "My drum will be an egg of an ant"; "He has died . . . only his still guitar is floating in the current." And her score is rich in color and expression.

The performance was beautiful. Soprano (Tony Arnold) and mezzo-soprano (Rachel Calloway) were like a single voice entwined in the text. Pianos and percussion, combining elements of sonic fire and ice, never ceased to dazzle. Passion emerged from subtle sounds, and Carneiro conducted alert to quietness and extravagance. With each new piece, Frank becomes a more exciting and necessary voice.

The other work on the program was Alberto Ginastera's "Cantata para América Mágica." Written in 1960, the score is known mainly by reputation, since it requires 13 percussionists, along with two pianos and a celesta. A mezzo-soprano is expected to stand up to this barrage.

The UC San Diego ensemble red fish blue fish was originally invited from La Jolla to play the cantata, because the Philharmonic thought it would need all that percussion for Frank. But she ultimately pared her initial instrumentation down. The cantata remained a knockout, a melee of metallic sparks and sparkle and a wild festival of drumming. Rand Steiger conducted, the percussionists went to town, and Stephanie Aston sang ably.