

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

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Lou Harrison just became a little bit better known

Pacific Symphony makes the case for his importance. That Piano Concerto? Heavenly.

By Mark Swed, Times Staff Writer May 26, 2006

The Pacific Symphony concluded the final — and major — program in its sixth American Composers Festival on Wednesday night with Lou Harrison's Piano Concerto. Carl St.Clair conducted with spirit. Ursula Oppens, the soloist, played with clarity, grace and strength, her sterling tone more than capable of penetrating and liquefying the dry acoustics of sound-sucking Segerstrom Hall.

It was half an hour of heaven.

Grand claims were made Wednesday for this concerto, which was written 20 years ago. Joseph Horowitz — the artistic advisor of the festival, this year devoted to Harrison — repeatedly called the work one of the great American piano concertos and insisted it should be instantly entered into the standard repertory. On a film clip from Eva Soltes' Lou Harrison Documentary Project, the conductor Dennis Russell Davies, who premiered the work, said the only reason it isn't played more is because his colleagues are ignorant and lazy.

That's true, although the concerto is not quite as neglected as all that. Keith Jarrett commissioned and recorded it. The popular British pianist Joanna MacGregor is a champion and recorded it in Australia. Oppens has played it often. The New West Symphony gave its Southern California premiere five years ago, with the composer (who died in 2003) on hand.

Still, this concerto does deserve to be better known. I've witnessed half a dozen performances and can attest to its sway over audiences from Ventura to Boston. No other American piano concerto, I think, is its equal. Edward MacDowell's are historical potboilers. Aaron Copland's is an early work. Henry Cowell's is exciting but not so grandly encompassing. George Gershwin's is uneven. Roger Sessions' is worthy but not great. Elliott Carter's is impressive but impenetrable. Leonard Bernstein's "Age of Anxiety" is more symphony than concerto. Samuel Barber's tunes can't hold a candle to Harrison's.

Harrison begins his concerto with a grand, Brahmsian gesture. Both composers were plump graybeards in their old age. Both looked back to the Baroque, but Harrison looked harder and here asked for a piano with an equal-tempered tuning that harks back to Bach's time. He called for a "selected" orchestra, namely instruments, such as strings and trombones, than can most easily adapt to this tuning.

But in the end the concerto, for all its hefty proportions, its robust melodies and its vivid keyboard writing, is more Brahman than Brahmsian. The tunes take us into other worlds, especially through the magic of the pure intervals. For a piano concerto slow movement that so evokes the mystery of the starry sky, you would have go back to Bach's F-minor. But don't even bother looking through the literature for anything similar to the danceable, thumping Stampede movement. And the last movement is a glitter-fest.

The first half of Wednesday's all-Harrison concert went back and forth between the effusive and reflective sides of the composer. It began peculiarly with "Bubaran Robert" for piccolo trumpet (Barry Perkins) and Javanese gamelan (the Harvey Mudd College American Gamelan), which Harrison wrote as music to be played as an audience leaves a hall. Segerstrom is not a gamelan-friendly environment, but the piece might have proved a sensation played in the lobby, requiring us to linger as we left.

"A Parade," written in 1995 for Michael Tilson Thomas' first concert as music director of the San Francisco Symphony, is a kitchen-sink blast of energy. "Elegy to the Memory of Calvin Simmons," written in memory of the conductor who died in a boating accident in 1982 at age 32, is a musical tear hovering around the eye and slowly flowing down a soft cheek. The Suite for Violin, Piano and Small Orchestra, from 1951, is the work in which Harrison found his voice. Hints of music near and far, contemporary and ancient, are mixed up throughout it. Bali meets Virgil Thomson and shakes hands with Schoenberg.

Harrison, who grew up in California, was living in New York when he wrote the suite. It had its premiere in Carnegie Hall. Leopold Stokowski made an early recording. This could have been the start of an epic career. But Harrison couldn't handle New York or the musical establishment. He returned to his roots near Santa Cruz and for half a century went his own way.

The committed, exuberant performances Wednesday, including those by violinist Raymond Kobler and pianist Gloria Cheng in the suite, were moving and joyful. But ghettoizing Harrison in a festival should be only a blip in the graph of the Establishment's catching up with this composer.

Is it too late to put one of these Harrison pieces on the Pacific Symphony's forthcoming Disney Hall concert, which will be attended by representatives from all of America's important orchestras?

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