

Long Beach Press Telegram

Bright future for 'Dos Visiones'

By John Farrell

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Monday, May 23, 2005 - The history of classical music criticism is littered with the bodies of those who have had pronounced greatness, or the lack thereof.

Bach, a man we consider one of the greatest of composers, was forgotten for a generation. Beethoven got bad reviews. And Salieri, a giant in his time, is now just a footnote in film histories.

Saying that a brand-new composition is going to be heard again, therefore, is a risky business. But there can be no doubt that "Dos Visiones/Two Visions," the work that highlighted the last concert of the Long Beach Symphony Orchestra's 70th season Saturday night at the Terrace Theater, will be heard again.

That isn't a critical judgment. But it should be. Enrique Arturo Diemecke, music director of the Long Beach Symphony, came up with the idea for the work, a joint composition by Mexican composer Ana Lara and American composer Robert Maggio, in a discussion with Gregorio Luke, curator of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, and Saturday's performance was the work's United States premiere.

The Long Beach Symphony and the Orquesta Nacional de Mexico, of which Diemecke is also music director, jointly commissioned the work, which had its world premiere in two concerts in Mexico City last October. And Diemecke, who also has orchestral duties in France and Flint, Mich., has already made plans to perform the work elsewhere. So it is no gamble to predict further performances.

Even without that boost, it was clear from Saturday's performance that "Dos Visiones" was not one of those modern works that vanishes from the repertory after one experimental performance. Big (nearly three-quarters of an hour in length), musically expansive, powerful and

accessible, "Dos Visiones," a project three years in the making, proved itself as an attractive work of passionate power and surpassing grace.

"Dos Visiones" is a programmatic work of a sort. Luke and Diemecke created the idea as a way to celebrate both music and art, specifically the extraordinary works that are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Latin American Art. The two composers were asked to view the collection and choose works of art to inspire their music. Those works, plus others related to them by theme or design, were then used to create a video, by Vito Kobliha, which was shown on a drop screen over the stage Saturday during the performance.

The combination worked well, with Kobliha's video, much more than just static shots of the paintings, moving in graceful coordination with the work itself, which was divided into six movements, alternating between composers. (The two composers each wrote their own sections, though they borrowed thematically from each other.)

This might well have proven to be a one-trick pony, a piece of music and film that celebrated one art collection, and had only local interest. The magnificence of the paintings featured, which deserve to be better known, may keep the work alive.

But music has a way of being music, and it must live and breathe, finally, as an independent force, as pure sound. There have been many attempts to mix medias, but music that survives survives alone.

"Dos Visiones" is just such a work. The video certainly informed the music and added to the performance experience Saturday, but it was the music that mattered: rich, inviting, rhythmically intriguing music that expressed the passions of two cultures and celebrated two rich and diverse kinds of music.

Lara and Maggio called on the forces of a large orchestra and plenty of unusual percussion for their composition. Lara's pieces were full of energy and the bright colors of Mexico, but their ethnicity never overpowered the elegance of her musical lines, the rich

tapestries of sound she created. Maggio's contributions were every bit as exciting, especially the last movement, which used chopped up pieces of the "Star-Spangled Banner" in a way American composer Charles Ives would have appreciated.

The evening was a celebration of the orchestra's history as well as a concert, and the program included a salute to long-time orchestra members, many of whom have served in the orchestra for decades. (Two, principal percussionist Lynda Sue Marks and violist Edwina Johnson, have been with the orchestra for over four decades. Another eight members have more than three decades with the orchestra.) That wealth of experience certainly explains why the orchestra plays with such a cohesive, almost single-minded sound.

To celebrate that sound and the end of the season, Diemecke programmed Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, his last, a work of gigantic passion and power that ends with a slow, sad movement that is often seen as the composer's final statement on life (he died less than two weeks after the work's premiere.)

Tchaikovsky was a master of orchestral color and in this work the orchestra is given a chance to create deep, rich sounds and bright, flowerlike colors as well as brilliant heroic fireworks and thoughtful reflections on life and the human condition.

The energy was there and to spare in the symphony's heroic and triumphant third movement, which, as always, provokes cheers at its coda. But there is a fourth movement, and Diemecke, signaling ever slight tremolo with his elegant hands, brought the work to a shattering, whispering close and held the audience silent for 30 seconds before finally signaling for applause.

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