

## MUSIC REVIEW

Cross-border effort bridges art, music

The Long Beach Symphony and an ensemble from Mexico share a musical vision of museum paintings.

By Richard S. Ginell  
Special to The Times

May 23, 2005

Almost everyone in classical music these days makes well-meaning noises about reaching out to the Latino community, but the Long Beach Symphony actually did something significant about it. Saturday night at the Terrace Theatre, the orchestra and its music director, Enrique Arturo Diemecke, gave the U.S. premiere of an arresting multimedia piece called "Dos Visiones."

Two visions indeed, for everywhere you looked, there were pairs. Two orchestras in two countries — the LBSO and the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México — co-commissioned the piece, along with two nonperforming groups, Long Beach's Museum of Latin American Art and the American Composers Forum. Two composers, Mexico City's Ana Lara and New Jersey's Robert Maggio, were selected to write three movements each, arranged in pairs with one composer following the next.

Basically, the agenda for Lara and Maggio was to write music inspired by paintings from the museum, while another pair of collaborators, film engineer/cinematographer Vito Kobliha and video choreographer Jack Fishman, concocted a video collage of the artwork. Sound familiar? "Pictures at an Exhibition" immediately comes to mind, but unlike Mussorgsky, neither Lara nor Maggio explicitly illustrate the paintings in their music.

In the first two movements, there were seemingly two divergent personalities at work — Lara's Mexican street procession over a pounding pace with traces of mariachi, followed by Maggio's juxtaposition of unusual effects (percussion shakers, faint women's voices, strummed piano strings) with snatches of American hymns woven into cinematic cues.

Yet in the next pair of movements, both unveiled bizarre senses of humor, with the antic, barbed spirit of Silvestre Revueltas hovering mischievously overhead. In the final pair, one got the feeling that both composers were seeking common ground and the video choreography grew more ambitious, with cubes of revolving artwork and finally a "Star Wars"-like race through an art-decorated tunnel. The 41-minute suite came off best when the composers forgot about the pretensions of ground-breaking and just had a fine time sending up everything.

"Pictures at an Exhibition" would have been an obvious companion piece. Too obvious, perhaps, so Diemecke opted for Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony where he exploited the outer movements for all the pulled-about, overwrought emotion he could muster.

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Long Beach Press Telegram

Bright future for 'Dos Visiones'

By John Farrell  
Correspondent

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 Koblaha, which was shown on a drop screen over the stage Saturday during the performance.

The combination worked well, with Koblaha'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.

John Farrell is a Long Beach freelance writer.

Friday, April 27, 2007

The lighter side of Mexico

As part of its American Composers Festival, the Pacific Symphony focuses on pleasingly entertaining samples of the country's music.

Timothy Mangan  
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The Orange County Register  
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It was a little strange to open the main event of the latest American Composers Festival – the 7th annual put on by the Pacific Symphony and this year devoted to the music of Mexico – with the *Danzón No. 2* by Arturo Márquez. The work, written in 1994, is a glamorously orchestrated dance of the type heard in Veracruz, and it comes dangerously close to cliché. With its sultry shuffle and languid lines and glossy colors, it's picture postcard music, the kind of thing the Boston Pops would program or something you'd hear in an old-fashioned Hollywood movie about Mexico.

Still, it's kind of fun, and wouldn't you know, little bits of it kept coming back to me unbidden after the concert was over, which is a sure sign of something. In fact, the whole program (Thursday in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall) proved to be on the lighter and catchier side, at least until the end, when we heard some terrific, unusual and challenging music by Ana Lara, one of the featured composers of this year's festival.

You shouldn't generalize about Mexico's classical music on the basis of this concert alone, but if you did you might say that the country's composers have a consuming need to please listeners perhaps above all else, and that they wear their popular music heritage on their sleeves. Busting stereotypes didn't seem to be on the agenda.

"If the name Manuel Ponce means anything to American music-lovers of my generation," wrote festival artistic advisor Joseph Horowitz in the program booklet, "it is that of a composer of elegant guitar trifles once associated with Andrés Segovia." And so what did guitarist Pepe Romero play of Ponce on Thursday? – some elegant guitar trifles, that's what. If elsewhere, in smaller, one-off concerts, the festival attempted to show Ponce as a major and "protean" composer, these bigger, well attended subscription concerts will reinforce the same impression that most of us have always had of Ponce.

What perhaps surprised most about Thursday's concert was how rich and satisfying this lighter fare can be. Classical music (anywhere) risks something essential when it forgets about reaching the average listener. Commissioned for the festival, Daniel Catán's "*Caribbean Airs*" doesn't forget about it. "I sincerely hope you enjoy listening to '*Caribbean Airs*' as much I enjoyed writing it," Catán says. "And if you find your hands and feet beginning to twitch rhythmically without your permission, please do not stop them." Hardly the manifesto of an iconoclast.

In three movements and 20 minutes long, "*Caribbean Airs*" uses the percussion (including bongos and congas) to get its rhythmic juices going. The work is all about rhythm, really, and its melodic

material – impulses and riffs, mainly, rather than full-blown themes – reinforces the rhythms, toys and plays with them, gives them vertical substance. It has some nice grooves, but overall is more eloquent than brash. It's a classy affair.

Enrique Diemecke's "Concerto a Celedonio," for guitar and orchestra (the composer is music director of the Long Beach Symphony), proved enjoyably elegant as well. On the whole, its ideas are simple, but it knows they are simple, and gets the most out of them through minimalistic techniques, delicate scoring and tasty chord progressions – a delight. Romero (the work is written in memory of his father) joined Carl St.Clair and the orchestra for a strongly felt performance.

"Angel of Darkness" and "Angel of Dawn," two movements of a larger work, revealed Lara (born in 1959) as a major and original voice. The two pieces, completely different in mood (and recognizable as Mexican not at all), nevertheless use similar means: long sustained notes and chords, floating, slowly developing arpeggios and merging sound masses. This music moves along magically, like dangerous fog and twinkling ether. By all means, we must hear the entire work.

St.Clair and the orchestra also offered a performance of "Caminos" (1934) by Silvestre Revueltas, one of the greatest Mexican composers. It's an ebullient, knotty and humorous thing, one of his "sound murals" that makes so many quick cuts from one music to another that a listener becomes dizzy and giddy. Conductor and orchestra gave it a good ride. It's just the tip of his magnificent repertoire. Here in Southern California we've heard quite a bit of Revueltas in recent years (Salonen and the L.A. Philharmonic even made a recording), but to my knowledge this was the first time St.Clair and the Pacific Symphony have played him. May it not be the last.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-pacific28apr28,1,3642612.story>

*From the Los Angeles Times*

**MUSIC REVIEW**

### **'Angels' soars above Mexican works on Pacific Symphony bill**

#### **Ana Lara's otherworldly 'Angels of Darkness and Dawn' soars above the other works on an all-Mexican program.**

By Mark Swed  
Times Staff Writer

April 28, 2007

When two angels finally descended upon the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Hall on Thursday, much music had been played and the evening had grown late. Up to that point, the Pacific Symphony had meant to please with suggestions of dance and a touch of sentimentality. Clichés were not excluded.

The concert was the main event of the orchestra's American Composers Festival, this year focused on Mexico. Carl St.Clair conducted with persuasive verve. A Texan, he didn't need to be taught the salsa. The orchestra played wonderfully, idiomatically. A carefree occasion, "Angels of Darkness and Dawn" were held at bay.

"Angels of Darkness and Dawn" is the first half of Ana Lara's "Angels of Flame and Ice," from 1994, and it was the evening's concluding work. Lara's other two angels, Light and Dusk, were not invited.

Lara, born in 1959, is one of Mexico's leading composers. Her chamber music — interesting, colorful — had been featured earlier in the festival and at a Monday Evening Concert this season. Lara's "Angels" are inevitably full of color. When she speaks of her music, as she has had repeated opportunity to do during the festival, she always speaks about color. She dresses stylishly, again with a sophisticated color sense.

But color isn't what struck me as the most remarkable element in Lara's "Angels" on Thursday. "Darkness" begins with the ancient Earth opening its mouth and intoning a primal, indescribable "Aaaaaaaaaaaaah." The sound comes from the depths of the orchestra, like a prelude to an Inca "Das Rheingold."

There's no sound quite like it. Joseph Horowitz, the festival's host and artistic advisor, called Lara's score apocalyptic. The composer writes in her program notes that her inspiration was four cosmological poems by Francisco Serrano. To me, this is not the sound of total destruction but global birth. There followed, to be sure, colorful instrumental effects aplenty. Lara seems to go stylistically from Wagner's Rhine to Respighi's "Pines of Rome," an Inca Rhine leading to an Inca Catacomb.

"Dawn" mists in an aura of Ravel, but the light this angel conveys is even more of another world. At the end, high-frequency overtones bounce off the hall's walls and all but short-circuit the inner ear.

After 15 minutes with two of Lara's angels, the music that went before seemed like it had happened long ago and on a planet far away. The most notable piece earlier in the program was the premiere of Daniel Catán's "Caribbean Airs," which had been commissioned for the occasion. Catán, with whom Lara studied, is now a local resident, currently writing "Il Postino" for Los Angeles Opera.

"Caribbean Airs" evokes Cuban music. The percussion section dominates. Bongos bang away, and so do congas. Cha-cha-cha rhythms charm. The strings swing with the luster of Hollywood in its heyday. Only in the last of the three movements is there a hint of darkness, and even here it is a dreamy darkness. The score offers 20 minutes of pure hedonism.

The festival has not ranged far and wide into the vastness of Mexico. Thursday's concert remained close to home. "Dánzon" No. 2 by Arturo Márquez, who studied at CalArts, opened the program. Another modernist turned populist, Marquez writes sweeping, swooning tropes on Cuban dance music. The "Dánzon" is irresistible, barely escaping the danger of over-mining the material.

Also with an L.A. connection was Enrique Arturo Diemecke's "Concerto a Celedonio," written for guitarist Pepe Romero by the Long Beach Symphony's music director. It is clever, appealing, lightweight music played with great style by a popular guitarist with a beautiful tone and wondrous lyrical sensibility.

Romero played three sentimental arrangements of Mexican songs by Manuel Ponce and an encore piece by his father, Celedonio Romero. And for a bit more history, St.Clair offered an exhilarating performance of Silvestre Revueltas' "Caminos," a nine-minute piece taken in seven.

Revueltas' music was the spirit of the Mexican Revolution, and ferocity served "Caminos" well, especially in a program with so much sugar. But Lara's two strange angels are what made it all worthwhile, and it is a great pity the other two weren't invited.

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Tuesday, April 17, 2007

## Discovering classical Mexico

Pacific Symphony launches its festival devoted to the country's music with a lively sampler program in Irvine.

**By TIMOTHY MANGAN**

The Orange County Register

The Pacific Symphony's 7th American Composers Festival, which opened Sunday afternoon at the Irvine Barclay Theatre, is this year devoted to the past and present of Mexican classical music. It's a huge and often distinguished repertoire and over the course of the event we'll hear music from the 17th, 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. This orchestra thinks big.

It will be impossible to cover the terrain in three programs; we'll familiarize ourselves with a few of the bigger names and currents. Sunday's program offered an Aztec dance, and music of two of the country's great composers from the last century and by two composers from this one. Dubbed "Discover Mexico," it lacked an overriding theme, and thus emerged as an interesting sampler without connected dots. Good enough.

It opened with a pair of Aztec dances, one stately, one rousing, performed in brilliant costume by the Ballet Folklórico of the Orange County High School of the Arts. Aztec music does not survive; some knowledge of the instruments that played it does, however. Here, a large conga-like drum was beat with thick wooden sticks, first marking time and then in a loud and athletic pattern. Someone ceremoniously blew a conch shell. The dancers shook rattles. No one vouched for the authenticity of the music or choreography and so we were left guessing. It was an entertaining way to start but it was minus the academic underpinning elsewhere evident in the festival (put together with the help of musicologist Joseph Horowitz).

Next came "Xochipilli," written in 1941 by Carlos Chávez (for another festival of Mexican music in New York) and subtitled "An Imagined Aztec Music for Four." Actually, there are 11 musicians: a piccolo, a flute, an E-flat clarinet, a trombone (which imitates the wail of a conch shell) and a battery of percussion played by seven musicians. It's a ritualistic, busily patterned piece of music that avoids sentimentality, melody and traditional tonality. It's bright, rhythmic and shrill and the Pacific Symphony musicians, led by guest conductor Enrique Diemecke (music director of the Long Beach Symphony) gave it a confident run-through.

Chávez and his colleague, the short-lived Silvestre Revueltas, are two of Mexican music's big names – they composed in modern, neo-classical styles, using folk music as inspiration.

Manuel Ponce, a little their senior, wrote music in an eloquent Romantic manner, but changed with the times (he lived 1882-1948), incorporating elements of Modernism as he grew older. His "Concierto del Sur," for guitar and orchestra, written in 1941 for Spanish guitarist Andrés Segovia, is a full-fledged concerto in three movements that sounds French, like Chabrier or perhaps Milhaud on a trip south of the border. The work is pleasingly melodic, dance-rhythmic and colorfully orchestrated and would seem to deserve to be heard a little more often.

Unfortunately, guitarist Roberto Limón, Diemecke and the orchestra sounded as if they were reading it through for the second time; the performance was labored and lacked spark.

Two pieces by Ana Lara (b. 1959, on hand for the occasion) were also performed. Her "Canticum Sacrum," originally for a cappella voices and here orchestrated for strings, uses Gregorian chant as its linear basis and a technique called heterophony, in which those lines are played in slightly different versions by the musicians at the same time (here in slight rhythmic displacement from one another) creating soft blurs of melody and harmony that float in and out of focus. The work's solemn progression and religious feeling is reminiscent of Arvo Pärt or Henryk Górecki.

In fact, Lara composes in an international style, not instantly recognizable as Mexican. Her Serenata for Wind Quintet and String Quintet (2005) takes its start from Mozart's serenades but brings them into the 21st century. The woodwinds play multiphonics (an extended technique where more than a single note is created by one player); the strings hover, tremble and provide sound effects of their own. The work's six short movements have a lovely directness and simplicity, though; they were written for young musicians, the composer said. They're like little fragments of half-forgotten dreams.

Arturo Márquez's 1997 Danzon No. 3, for solo guitar (Limón) and chamber orchestra, closed the event in pops fashion. Before the performance of it, Diemecke demonstrated the salient characteristics of the danzon, a suave, hip-swiveling dance from Cuba that took its own Mexican form in Veracruz. Diemecke then proceeded to do the same in front of the orchestra during the performance of the piece, which is pretty much a straightforward and lush arrangement of the real deal. It was interesting to note that Márquez had at one time been an "experimental" composer.

The festival continues Friday with a historical survey of chamber music and then April 26-29, with orchestral programs led by Carl St.Clair.

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Aulos/Reseña

**true art...and a great deal of fun, for serious listeners, July 28, 2000**

Reviewer: **Joe Aimone (see more about me)** from Olivet, Michigan

The hardest thing in the world may be to describe beautiful music, for that stuff involves itself so intimately with the founding moments of our understanding and appreciation of sound as a medium of communication that it must perform seem almost to speak for itself. In a case such as this recording one is tempted to pin down the perfections of each contributor to the performance: the cerebral lyricism of the flautist, the urgent and passionate precision of the bassoonist, the wounded poignancy of the oboist's tone, the strident brilliance and bravery of the

clarinetist, the vatic insistency of the hornist's pronouncements and counter-statements. But one ends up thus only restating the characteristic powers of the instruments themselves at their best, when the collaboration of spirit, quite literally here, in the sense of the common dance of the breath, carried out so elegantly and with such a seamless blending of apparent mind, may be the real outstanding virtue of the performance.

And none of that comment would yet touch the importance of the composers chosen, in the sweep of a century of Mexican music, from the founding titan Carlos Chavez, whose last years were spent in New York in disappointment with the direction of Mexican musical culture in the 1970s, so different from now, to the very contemporary and highly innovative Ana Lara, perhaps one of the outstanding women concert music composers of the world in our day. And, just as the historical imperatives of the Mexican Revolution so decisively shaped the aesthetic of 20th century modernist works from Mexico such as those of Chavez, with their reclamation and re-invention of a native or quasi-native foundational musical sensibility while fully respecting a Western tradition frankly recognized as imperialist, so the post-modern pastiche of styles and devices of the late capitalist world find their startling reflection in the appropriation in Lara's music of decidedly European influences by a post-colonial musical mind, as serenely open to new possibilities as to suggest that Mexico's musicians have, as Octavio Paz wished for the entire country over twenty years ago in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, "[found their] own modernity" and succeeded, as he hoped, through "an extraordinary imagination." The works by Enriquez, Ibarra and Lavista only confirm this impression.

And yet, although this recording is indeed serious music for serious listeners, those ready to devote the reverent attention, the sense of history and technique true art demands, it is also a great deal of fun, something playful and innocent and soothing, the experience of hearing it something like being a child still dreaming safe in its mother's arms, no matter how hostile the world.

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If the information does not display clearly for you below, you may also see it [here](#).

	<p><b>Ana Lara's Angels of Flame and Ice in Sonidos Festival</b>  <i>"a primal, indescribable 'Aaaaaaaaaaaah'"</i></p> <p>Thus Mark Swed's description of the opening movement of <a href="#">Ana Lara's</a> stunning <i>Angels of Flame and Ice</i>, which closed the Pacific Symphony's ambitious Sonidos festival of Mexican music in a program led by Carl St. Clair at the end of April. <a href="#">Complete review</a>.</p> <p>In the Orange County Register, Timothy Mangan wrote: <i>"Angel of Darkness" and "Angel of Dawn," two movements of a larger work, revealed Lara (born in 1959) as a major and original voice. The two pieces, completely different in mood (and recognizable as Mexican not at all), nevertheless use similar means: long sustained notes and chords, floating, slowly developing arpeggios and merging sound masses. This music moves along magically,</i></p>	
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*like dangerous fog and twinkling ether. By all means, we must hear the entire work."* Lara's *Canticum Sacrum* for small string orchestra and *Serenata* for wind quintet and string quintet were also heard in the Sonidos festival, as were works by [Arturo Márquez](#), [Manuel M. Ponce](#), and [Silvestre Revueltas](#), offered in four different programs. Mark Swed wrote that Revueltas's *Caminos* is "*an ebullient, knotty and humorous thing, one of his 'sound murals' that makes so many quick cuts from one music to another that a listener becomes dizzy and giddy. Conductor and orchestra gave it a good ride. It's just the tip of his magnificent repertoire.*"

#### **Jacob ter Veldhuis Takes Manhattan**

On May 2, 3 and 4, the Whitney Museum presented three nights of Jacob ter Veldhuis' chamber music. Classical music blog sequenza21 wrote: "*Jacob ter Veldhuis might be [the best composer you've never heard of](#), and included a discussion of JacobTV's **Rainbow Concerto** for cello and orchestra and the video oratorio **Paradiso**, both works looking for their U.S. premieres.*

David Patrick Stearns wrote in the Philadelphia Inquirer that the first evening showed how the composer "*molded a sophisticated, urban artistic language with much to say on matters ranging from Billie Holiday to nuclear winter.*" And Steve Smith, on his blog nightafternight, wrote that the final night "*was an ideally paced sampler of some of his most effective pieces, played by a parade of New York's new-music elite (cellist Dorothy Lawson, flutist Margaret Lancaster, pianist Kathleen Supové, the Meehan-Perkins Percussion Duo and Kevin Gallagher's Electric Kompany).*"

#### **For the Lincoln Bicentennial: This Sacred Ground**

Orchestras looking for a work celebrating the legacy of Abraham Lincoln in honor of his bicentennial in February 2009

might consider David Diamond's *This Sacred Ground*, for mixed chorus, children's chorus, baritone solo and orchestra. The work is a setting of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. All Music Guide wrote that Diamond's "*open-hearted music is readily accessible, enjoyable, and moving. No preparation is needed to appreciate Diamond's diatonic harmonies, straightforward melodies, and lean counterpoint.*" **Description and audio samples [here](#).**

#### **John Musto's *Volpone* schemes again**

The comic opera *Volpone*, a retelling of Ben Jonson's 17th century study of greed, with music by John Musto and libretto by Mark Campbell, is being restaged by [Wolf Trap Opera Company](#) in late June and early July. Wolf Trap commissioned the work and premiered it to acclaim in 2004.

#### **Rave Review for Musto Chamber Music CD**

Music from Copland House's CD on Bridge Records garnered this headline in Gramophone: "***Rise up to John Musto's music of urban energy and rhythmic vitality,***" and went on to describe "wild flights and melancholic utterances" and much [more](#).

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## **Last Night in L.A.: New Voices**

**Monday Evening Concerts** are alive and well and being given in the great acoustics of Zipper Hall! And if you don't know why that's important you're reading the wrong blog. Last night's program was the most stimulating in four or five years, stimulating because it presented works by six talented composers, works that were fresh and alive and downright good music.

One of the fresh approaches in the new MEC is to have a musician serve as curator for the program, selecting composers to bring to our attention and determining the works to support the rationale. In this first program **Steven Stucky** identified six composers in their early-to-middle careers, composers he felt we should know more about. As Stucky pointed out, the awards received and notable appearances given by these six point out they are certainly not "unknown artists"; instead, they are composers we should know much more about. Our local **Xtet** group provided the professional

musicians for five of the six works (student violinists performed the sixth), and composer/conductor/professor **Donald Crockett** of USC and Xtet conducted four of the pieces.

The concert began with "Gran Turismo" (2005) by **Andrew Norman**, one of the twenty-year-olds, currently in Rome enjoying his **Rome Prize**. His bio lists 12 other prizes for composition. The work is a delightful perpetual motion for eight (8) violins. It was inspired by some paintings by Italian Futurists, particularly those of **Giacomo Balla** showing racing cars, paintings attempting to show movement and speed. A great start for a concert!

**James Matheson** wrote the next work, "Falling" (2000) for violin, cello and piano. Matheson did his graduate work (MFA, DMA) at Cornell, studying with Stucky and writing his doctoral thesis on Harbison's music. Also with awards aplenty (I'll stop saying this), Matheson received a commission from Carnegie for Upshaw's Perspectives series, a composition for soprano and chamber orchestra. "Falling", with a recurring motif of descending notes only to end in peaceful contemplation, acknowledges pre-modern musical forms while speaking in contemporary musical language. I could find only one clip of another work by Matheson on the Amazon search, and another clip on iTunes. I'd like to hear both his Carnegie commission and his work for the Albany Orchestra.

**Sean Shepard**, the other composer in his 20s, closed the first half with "Lumens" (2005) for violin, cello, flute/piccolo, clarinet, piano, and percussion, primarily tuned percussion. His **web site** gives three clips, which sound exactly as I remembered the performance, plus notes on the composition. I find it interesting that he would mention that some might object to the prettiness of the work, but that he persisted and was able to write something that might be so accessible.

A slightly older contingent had works in the second half of the concert, kicked off by "peal" (2000) by Philippe Bodin. This is a work for violin, cello, flute, clarinet, and piano. Bodin's notes describe the work as variations on a theme of a two-voice canon. My ears don't hear canon inversions, so I'll accept his description. His personal web site provides two good **clips** (and **here**) of the interesting music.

If applause can be trusted, the audience favorite was the fifth work, "Darkness Visible" (1998-1999) by **Ana Lara**. Her work (for violin, viola, cello, bass, flute, clarinet, piano, percussion). This is accessible, but moody — quite appealing to an audience hearing it for the first time. Her web site gives eight mp3 **clips**, all of other works but bearing a compositional relationship to what we heard last night. Amazon has only one composition of hers, on a multi-composer CD. One of her compositions was performed by our local Long Beach, but her works deserve much more exposure.

The program closed similarly to its start, with a work about speed (or time), "Faster Still" (2004) by **Brian Current**. The master, **Alan Rich**, quotes Stucky as describing the work: "It's as if Elliott Carter wrote only arpeggios." The work is for solo violin and piano, accompanied by a traditional string quartet. The solo violin part is fast and furious (most often), and the piano part is probably somewhat challenging, although it's not as showy. Tempi change constantly. No sound clips are available. Only one of his works is listed by Amazon. His web site, however, does provide some interesting **mp3s**, on two web pages.

Steven Stucky made his point: these are composers we should hear more.

Saturday night we saw the L.A. Opera's production of "**Mahagonny**". The reviews haven't been good. I liked it. Very much. I thought it was the best realization of Brecht's theories of theatre that I've seen, and Audra McDonald was a great Jenny. Conlon as conductor kept all touches of romanticism out of the playing. Of all my musical enthusiasms from college, the one to last has been that for Kurt Weill's music. I think Brecht is seeming more and more like an historical artifact, but that music is still fresh and bracing.

Jerry Z