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Symphony marches to forceful beat

By Georgia Rowe
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

Anyone hoping to catch forty winks at Sunday afternoon's California Symphony concert was in for a bit of a surprise. The high-energy program conducted by music director Barry Jekowsky seemed designed to keep listeners on the edge of their seats.

Sunday's dynamic program at the Leshner Center, which repeats tonight as the second subscription concert of the orchestra's 2006-07 season, represents one of Jekowsky's most inspired assemblies in recent memory. Pairing Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 2, "The Age of Anxiety," with Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 and Michael Torke's "Rapture: Drums and Woods," the conductor offered a gripping study in rhythmic contrasts.

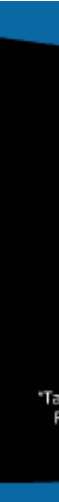
It's hardly surprising that Jekowsky's programming choices reflect an affinity for rhythm; the conductor spent the early years of his career as a timpanist. With Sunday's performance of Torke's "Rapture: Drums and Woods," Jekowsky returned to his roots, stepping off the podium to make his first appearance as soloist with the orchestra he has led for 20 years.

Composed in 2001 for the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, "Rapture" is a concerto for percussion and orchestra; "Drums and Woods" is the first of its three movements. Rather than pit the soloist against the orchestra, Torke makes the percussionist into the leader; the orchestra follows close behind, shadowing his every phrase. The effect is one of massive force, with the soloist always dominating.

Manning an outsize percussion setup containing snare drums, timbales, bongos, congas, temple drums and woodblocks, Jekowsky deftly negotiated the piece, which starts with a bang and never lets up throughout its 10-minute running time. The orchestra surges and blares behind him, but the soloist is the prime mover, and Jekowsky performed with vigor and intensity. It made a scintillating curtain-raiser.

Jekowsky, who has conducted an American work on every California Symphony program throughout his 20-year tenure, made "The Age of Anxiety" -- which, despite its symphonic

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title, is a piano concerto -- the afternoon's centerpiece. Norman Krieger, who has given memorable performances with the orchestra before, returned as soloist, impressing all over again in Bernstein's daunting work for orchestra and piano.

Composed in 1948-49 and revised in 1965, Bernstein's score takes its title from a W.H. Auden poem about 20th century malaise. The music is characteristically Bernstein: broad, showy, encompassing a range of styles from Baroque dance forms to jazz and 12-tone modernism. Jekowsky emphasized the score's myriad shifts, and Krieger rode the waves with an aptly expressive, large-scale performance.

After intermission, Jekowsky and the orchestra gave an equally muscular performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. More than a century separates Beethoven's score and Bernstein's, but, perhaps not surprisingly, Beethoven once again managed to sound like the afternoon's most daring revolutionary voice.

CONCERT REVIEW

- WHO: The California Symphony
- WHAT: Music by Beethoven, Bernstein and Torke
- WHERE: Leshner Center for the Arts, Civic Drive and Locust Street, Walnut Creek
- WHEN: 7:30 tonight
- HOW MUCH: \$39-\$59
- CONTACT: 925-943-SHOW



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