

Review



**SYMPHONY
REVIEW**

**California
Symphony**

Norman Krieger

Barry Jekowsky

January 28, 2007



Norman Krieger



Barry Jekowsky

A Different Drummer

By Benjamin Frandzel

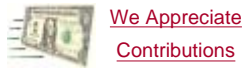
Rhythm, color, and high energy took center stage at the California Symphony's concert Sunday at the Dean Lesher Center in Walnut Creek. Along with the rare sight of a conductor/percussionist leading the ensemble, two substantial works from the symphonic repertory — one utterly familiar but sounding fresh, and one worthy but too little heard — made for a compelling program.

The afternoon opened with Music Director Barry Jekowsky reviving his long-dormant role as percussionist for the opening movement of Michael Torke's percussion concerto, *Rapture*. Titled "Drums and Woods," the movement featured an array of toms, woodblocks, timbales, bongos, congas, temple blocks, and snare, all played with panache by Jekowsky, who somehow managed to use his few breaks from the solo part to turn around and cue the ensemble.

I hadn't heard Torke's music for a while and had hoped that this work from 2001 might reveal a deeper sensibility than his earlier symphonic pieces, which showed a flare for colorful use of the orchestra but not much else. Because this performance featured only the first of three movements, it's not possible to judge *Rapture* as a whole, but I wasn't left with an impression of great artistic growth.

Although the work combines a bravura solo part, skillful rhythmic shifts, and some attractive orchestration, it still dwells among the superficial attempts at crowd-pleasing and "accessibility" that characterized the composer's earlier music. Truth be told, I heard this work as something that could function as an overture for a current Broadway show, with a bit of rock influence, a simple harmonic structure, and a mild sense of drama.

The performance itself outshone Torke's musical ideas. Jekowsky, who served as the San Francisco Symphony's principal timpanist for nearly two decades, confessed during an audience Q&A that he "hadn't picked up the sticks for 12 years," but you would never have guessed it. He delivered an exciting and thoroughly professional performance as the soloist. His tight accompaniment of the orchestra, despite the few opportunities he had to face them, was a testament to both his



[Performance
Calendar](#)

[Join the
Friends of SFCV](#)

[Archive](#)

[Donations](#)

[Advertising
Information](#)

[Newsletter
Subscriptions](#)

[Calendar
Submissions](#)

[About Us](#)

[Links](#)

[Home](#)

skills as a leader and the level of this ensemble. The strings sounded a bit overshadowed during some tutti passages, but otherwise this was an impressive showing of orchestral cohesion within a rhythmically challenging framework.

Partnering with aplomb

Joined by piano soloist Norman Krieger, the orchestra delivered a powerful and moving account of Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 2, *The Age of Anxiety*. The performance began beautifully, with its lonely, chantlike clarinet duet. Jekowsky gracefully let the music grow from these basic contrapuntal gestures and nocturnal mood, as the full orchestra gradually joined in with a variety of textural and rhythmic approaches.

From his opening chords, Krieger proved to be an ideal partner to the orchestra, delivering a soulful performance marked by the range of colors and clear voicings he brought to the instrument, as well as great aplomb in the most virtuosic passages. The orchestra and soloist handled sharply the work's skittering, jazz-inspired elements, and with deep feeling delivered the slower, moodier passages. In the work's ambition and scope, you can sense Bernstein, composing at the end of the 1940s, seeking to rise to the beauty and grandeur in the works of Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and other American symphonists who preceded him. Sunday's performance made a convincing case for this hybrid of symphony, concerto, and tone poem to stand alongside the best work of that school.

The program ended with a strong and committed performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7. Jekowsky's tempi in the first two movements were patient but steady, finding an effective balance between their unique blend of incredibly propulsive rhythm and a nearly static motivic vocabulary. This set the stage for the breakneck pace of the final two movements, which delivered the desired thrills to cap a highly rewarding concert.

(Benjamin Frandzel is a Bay Area musician and writer. In addition to writing concert music, he has collaborated with dance, theater, and visual artists and has written about music for many publications and musical organizations. He is currently a graduate student in composition at San Francisco State University.)

©2007 Benjamin Frandzel, all rights reserved



SAN | FRANCISCO | CLASSICAL | VOIC
E