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**CONCERT REVIEW**

**American music emerges triumphant at Cal Symph concert**

By Georgia Rowe  
TIMES CORRESPONDENT  
Article Launched: 05/07/2007 11:15:38 AM PDT

AN AIR of Eastern exoticism dominated Sunday afternoon's California Symphony concert at the Leshner Center. From Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite from "Scheherazade," to Ravi Shankar's Concerto No. 1 for Sitar and Orchestra, the program was heavy with the sounds of enchantment.

Yet, by the end of the 2 1/2-hour performance, it was the program's frankly American music that yielded the greatest rewards.

Sunday's concert, which repeats Tuesday night as the final program of the orchestra's 2007/08 season, introduced the latest work commissioned by the orchestra under music director Barry Jekowsky as part of the symphony's Young American Composer in Residence program.

No surprise there. Jekowsky conducts at least one American piece on every California Symphony program, and the music of the orchestra's resident composers has always figured prominently in the season-ending concert. But this week's piece is something novel, for this orchestra or any American ensemble. The four-movement "Concerto for Orchestra," which receives its world premiere on this program, includes one movement each from four past resident composers: Pierre Jalbert, Kevin Beavers, Kevin Puts and Chris Theofanidis.

With each composer focusing on a different section of the orchestra, the work emerged in a first performance that was attractive, dynamic and brimming with musical ideas.

The opening movement, Jalbert's "Music of Air and Fire," features the percussion section in music of great

contrasts: The piece starts quietly with bowed percussion instruments and vibraphone, gradually involves the other sections and builds to an insistent, pulse-driven conclusion. Beavers' "Tipsy" follows, shifting the focus to the woodwinds; as the title suggests, the music is lighthearted, woozy-sounding, with an amusing outbreak of triangle playing throughout the orchestra.

The third movement, Puts' "Furioso," is a three-minute showpiece for strings. The brass section comes to the fore in the majestic finale, Theofanidis' "A Hymn to Music."

Each composer has given the orchestra impressive new music in past seasons, and it was thrilling to hear their efforts assembled in a single work. The writing in each movement was distinctive, and Jekowsky's forceful direction brought the movements together as a whole.

The orchestra also played with tremendous vivacity in the second half's performance of "Scheherazade." All the colors, textures and evocative Eastern sounds of Rimsky's painterly

suite were on brilliant display; concertmaster Roy Malan introduced the work's famous first theme with singing tone, and -- as with the new concerto -- every section of the orchestra got a chance to shine.

In the middle, there was Shankar's Sitar Concerto, featuring Anoushka Shankar (the composer's daughter) as soloist. No one is more qualified to advance the cause of the sitar than Ravi Shankar, who brought the plaintive-sounding instrument to international prominence in the 1960s when he introduced it to the Beatles.

Like Shankar's other daughter, the singer Norah Jones, Anoushka is a dark-eyed beauty, and she played the instrument with considerable grace; guest percussionist Jesse Charnow played the drum part with precision.

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Anoushka Shankar takes her place next to her sitar on a... (Joanna Jhanda/Contra Costa Times)

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But the concerto itself isn't terribly engaging. Each movement features a short (by sitar standards) raga, none of which features the kind of extended virtuosity made famous by Ravi Shankar. Nor does the composer give the orchestra much to do, besides keeping time and echoing the sitar lines. Jekowsky did his best to make a persuasive case for it.

- WHO: The California Symphony and sitarist Anoushka Shankar
- WHAT: Works by Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravi Shankar, Pierre Jalbert, Kevin Beavers, Kevin Puts and Chris Theofanidis
- WHERE: Leshner Center for the Arts, Civic and Locust, Walnut Creek
- WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday
- HOW MUCH: \$49-\$59
- CONTACT: 925-943-7469

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