

San Francisco Chronicle

Composers patch together a concerto

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The **California Symphony's** Young American Composer-in-Residence program has brought a handful of capable and sometimes powerful musical voices into the spotlight over the past 16 years. Sunday afternoon's concert at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek offered a retrospective of sorts: a composite concerto, with individual movements contributed by four of the five past occupants of the post.

Music Director Barry Jekowsky has been unveiling single movements -- one each by Pierre Jalbert, Kevin Beavers, Kevin Puts and Christopher Theofanidis -- over the course of this season. Sunday's season-ending program introduced Jalbert's "Music of Air and Fire," the concerto's opening movement, followed in quick succession by

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the world premiere of the entire 20-minute work.

In one respect at least, the results were what you might expect. Composition by committee is not much different from any other kind of committee activity, and the four movements -- with their different stylistic premises and musical concerns -- didn't have much to say to one another.

But leaving matters of unity aside, there was some engaging music on display here. Jekowsky kept the composers out of each other's hair by asking each one to concentrate on one of the four sections of the orchestra, and Jalbert's writing for the percussion -- beginning with some lush sounds made by bowing the percussion instruments before segueing into an energetic outburst -- got the piece off to a vivid start.

Writing for the brass, Theofanidis concluded the piece with a heartfelt hymn to music, a little corny in its earnestly choral style, perhaps, but written with imagination and heft. In between came "Topsy," Beavers' comic sketch for some uninhibited woodwind players, and Puts' brief, breathless scherzo for strings. Jekowsky put it all together with flair.

The theme of unusual juxtapositions continued with a performance of Ravi Shankar's Concerto No. 1 for Sitar and Orchestra, with the composer's daughter Anoushka -- fresh from a joint appearance with her father in Berkeley a week earlier -- as the soloist.

Written in 1971 on a commission from the London **Symphony** Orchestra, Shankar's concerto has all the modesty necessary to make this kind of shotgun marriage work.

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The orchestra is well behaved and deferential, giving the soloist all the room she needs to do her vivid, note-bending stuff.

And Anoushka Shankar has a plentiful repertoire of improvisatory, melodically fertile ideas at her disposal. For her first solo, set in free rhythmic time against a sustained drone from the cellos in imitation of the tambura used in traditional Indian music, she launched into an eloquent and sometimes feverishly inventive monologue.

Later, the score had her exchanging short melodic phrases with the orchestral woodwind players in a slightly formal but often touching dialogue. Percussionist Jesse Charnow provided brisk counterpoint with bongos, taking the place of the tabla.

After intermission, Jekowsky led the orchestra in a vibrant performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," full of rugged rhythmic life and instrumental color. Concertmaster Roy Malan's billowing violin solos were lean and incisive, if lacking slightly in luxuriance, and there were excellent solo contributions by harpist Dan Levitan, bassoonist Gregory Barber, clarinetist Jerome Simas and cellist Leighton Fong.

California Symphony: 7:30 tonight. Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. Tickets: \$39-\$59. Call (925) 943-7469 or go to www.dlrca.org

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