



SYMPHONY REVIEW

California
Symphony

Peng Peng

Conrad Tao

Barry Jekowsky

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Barry Jekowsky



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Birthday Songs

By Janos Gereben

Silver (25 years), gold (50), and diamond (75) anniversaries may come and go, but the California Symphony is reveling in its year of china (or platinum), the proper gift for the two-decade mark. On Sunday, the Walnut Creek orchestra threw itself a birthday party, trumpeting "20" everywhere, from posters to programs and announcements ... and even an audience sing-along.

The anniversary season opened with founder and Music Director Barry Jekowsky conducting the national anthem. Next came John Williams' orchestral showoff, *Happy Birthday Variations*, and the audience was instructed to sing "20 years of great music, California Symphony!" Adding to the celebration, two young pianists played their own devilishly clever *Happy Birthday* variations, complete with classical, jazz, and showbiz undercurrents. By that time, pretty much everybody got the message: The California Symphony is 20 years old.

And how is the birthday boychick doing? Decidedly well. With the participation of musicians from around the Bay Area, the orchestra has been cobbled together to excellent effect. The Williams piece, which features each section separately, the centerpiece Mozart Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat Major, and the Brahms Symphony No. 1 all received fine performances under Jekowsky's fever-pitch conducting.

Tipsy world premiere

Jekowsky was most relaxed and most effective in the afternoon's unique offering, the premiere of Kevin Beavers' commissioned concerto for orchestra, titled *Tipsy*. Celebrating the state of being slightly inebriated, Beavers' brief work sparkles, spins, flutters, stammers, and rejoices, giving each section a hiccup or two of its own. In one hilarious section that used triangles spread through the orchestra, from percussion all the way to concertmaster, the otherwise austere Roy Malan laid down the violin, picked up a triangle, and banged it with giddy abandon.

Unusual as *Tipsy* is musically, it's even rarer in its gestation and

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nature. Part of a commissioned four-movement concerto for orchestra, each movement is written by an alumnus of California Symphony's important Young American Composer-in-Residence program. Subsequent programs will premiere movements by Chris Theofanidis, Kevin Puts, and Pierre Jalbert. And on the season's final subscription program, the entire work will be performed for the first time.

**Peng Peng**

Photo by Howard L. Kessler

**Conrad Tao**

Besides the Young American Composers program, California Symphony has another distinction: It features teenage (or even preteen) soloists, most memorably Sarah Chang's debut here in 1991, when she was nine years old. On Sunday, extreme youth was served twice, with 12-year-old Conrad Tao and 14-year-old Peng Peng as soloists in the Mozart concerto. While their performances didn't strain credulity as much as Chang's debut (which still causes heads to shake all these years later), the two Juilliard piano and composition students played impressively, much to the delight of Jekowsky, the orchestra, and the audience.

The youngsters followed the concerto, written by the "elderly" Mozart (all of 22), with a composition of their own. They threw their caution in the Mozart performance to the winds and had a ball with their own variations on *Happy Birthday* — easily besting the earlier-heard Williams variations in enthusiasm and ebullience.

Playing Brahms ... and winning

The Brahms symphony opened huge and bright, sounding more Tchaikovsky-lyrical than Beethoven-appropriate, but terrific regardless. At that point I made a note in the program: "rehearsal priority." Clearly, Jekowsky worked on the first movement above all else. And it showed. The large portions of the Allegro were deeply satisfying; musical sentences, paragraphs, whole pages came across flawlessly and cohesively.

The problem with priorities is that if one thing is on top, others are not. By the Andante, some of the forward momentum was lost or at least jeopardized as Jekowsky proceeded with (probably wise) caution. The soaring theme later in this movement lacked the intensity and majesty of the first movement. Malan's solo provided a welcome return to excellence.

The third movement, marked "poco allegretto e grazioso," was gracious enough. The tempo was properly midway between andante and allegro, but important pizzicato passages sounded tentative at first. The brass section acquitted itself well and the orchestra tried hard, but the audience — which did itself proud throughout with exemplary behavior — began fidgeting, reflecting the softening of the focus in the performance.

The closing Adagio must have received sufficient rehearsal time, because its great, central hymnlike theme enveloped the hall thrice, with a blazing, majestic resolution at the finale. At 20, both youthful and accomplished, California Symphony should have many happy returns.

(Janos Gereben is a regular contributor to *San Francisco Classical Voice*. His e-mail address is janosg@gmail.com.)

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