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Review: 'Dead Symphony' blooms to mellow life in Walnut Creek

By Sue Gilmore
Contra Costa Times

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Jerry Garcia and Igor Stravinsky sharing a double bill is about as bizarre a programming choice as you can come up with, but that's exactly what California Symphony concertgoers got in Sunday afternoon's performance at the Leshner Center in Walnut Creek.

Make that Jerry Garcia as channeled by Lee Johnson. The Atlanta-based composer has taken 10 tunes out of the late Grateful Dead leader's songbook and reworked them for full orchestra into a 12-movement "Dead Symphony" that opens and closes with rowdy versions of the "Funiculi, Funicula" song all true Deadheads remember as a staple at their concerts.

Previously recorded by the Russian National Orchestra, it made its world premiere with the Baltimore Symphony on Garcia's birthday last August. Sunday, with maestro Barry Jekowsky conducting in tie-dye and tails, the piece made its West Coast debut on a program that closed with Stravinsky's "The Firebird Suite."

And what a study in contrasts that was!

Not being much of a Deadhead, I can't comment on how intimate familiarity with their music might have affected an appreciation of Johnson's oeuvre. The

only tune I recognized at all came in the "Sugar Magnolia" movement, a peppery little romp delivered entirely by the woodwind section with special nonstop duty assigned to a bassoonist who probably wanted to fall into a dead faint when it was over.

While there didn't seem to be an inch of new ground traversed in terms of orchestral innovation, there was much to enjoy in these loosely linked musical tributes. Rich harmonies and lovely melodies abounded in most of the movements, with the intentional exceptions of the blaring martial blasts in the "Blues for Allah" section and the semicontrolled cacophony that erupted as an improvisatory jam in "Stella Blue," where everybody rioted and a jazzy trumpet seemed to think it was in charge.

Especially appealing was the Coplandesque "Here Comes Sunshine" with its woodwinds afloat in midair above low strings and the gorgeous embrace of plucked cellos and sweet violins in a dotted-rhythm dance in "Mountains of the Moon." "If I Had the World to Give," pared down to a string quartet, was simple, spare and effectively delivered.

So if mellow seemed to be the mood of the hour, things changed drastically after intermission when Jekowsky returned, having traded the tie-dye for white tie, to conduct a dynamic performance of Stravinsky's extravagantly lustrous, downright phantasmagorical "Firebird." Here, where the orchestration, complex rhythms and need for precise unanimity of attack presented thornier challenges, conductor and players acquitted themselves very well indeed. But for a flubbed note from a French horn here and there and a muffed entry for brass fanfare, the symphony's rendition of this early work, in which Stravinsky honed many of his trademark orchestral techniques, sparkled and shimmered and delivered the thunderbolts in all the

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Reach Sue Gilmore at sgilmore@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Concert Review WHO: The California Symphony WHAT: Lee Johnson's "A Dead Symphony" and Stravinsky's "The Firebird Suite" WHERE: Leshner Center for the Arts, Civic and Locust, Walnut Creek WHEN: 7:30 tonight tickets: \$39-\$59 CONTACT: 925-943-7469 or www.californiasymphony.org

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