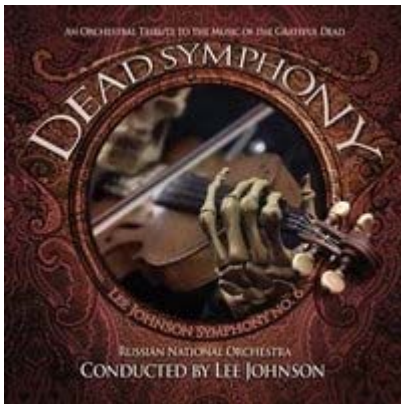


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Guest Review: A Deadhead tunes in to California Symphony's

BY MICHAEL STAMM



Note from Pete: I was hoping to attend the California Symphony's *Grateful Dead Symphony No. 6* on Sunday or Tuesday, but I've been all consumed with the incredible Noir City film noir festival at the Castro Theatre. So I sent a friend, Michael Stamm—who is a fantastic chef, Olympic multi-medalist swimmer, and Deadhead extraordinaire to check out the performance. Here's what he said:

Michael Stamm's review:

Upon entering the lobby of the Leshner Center for the Arts last night, my eye was drawn to the neon light sculptures and other kinetic art pieces in the Bedford Gallery. As I approached the doorway into the gallery, a roomful of photographs by local legend Herb Greene, documenting three decades of the Grateful Dead, graced the walls on my left. I was attending the west coast premiere of "Dead Symphony no. 6" composed by Lee

Johnson and performed by the California Symphony, with Barry Jekowsky conducting.

Lee Johnson is an accomplished composer-conductor who was not a follower of the Grateful Dead. But a Deadhead friend in Atlanta's concert community convinced him to score an orchestral tribute. A decade later, the twelve-movement score has been recorded by the Russian National Orchestra, and it is as ear-pleasing and mind-bending as any performance by the Dead. In the case of last evening, the performance was further augmented by the large 'Steal Your Face' banner above the orchestra and Mr. Jekowsky conducting the piece in tie-dye shirt and black tail coat.

It could be argued that it was that free-form quality found in their jamming that gave the Dead their name in history. They transcended musical genres, and I think this is what composer Lee Johnson has captured in his symphony—that free-spirited, bigger-than-life, almost mystical vibe.

Many Dead songs already have that grand, symphonic quality. The music of the Grateful Dead—the jazz, bluegrass, rock, and blues—is amazingly complex at times. Transforming the songs with a symphonic twist gave them a new life, letting the songs reach new audiences, like a tributary of a great, raging river.

A variation of "Funiculi, Funicula," (which any Deadhead will recognize as a stall or filler before a show was to start or continue, depending on the technical difficulties encountered frequently by various members of the band) was the starting point of the program.

"Here Comes Sunshine" was drastically slowed down from its original form. So much that I almost got lost in its slowness—almost. Three minutes into it, we heard the chorus. Another song that kind of faded off was "To Lay Me Down" following a very beautiful upswEEP of emotional melodies.

Other songs, like "Sugar Magnolia" and "Mountains of the Moon," were easily recognizable. Their melodies shine through brightly and without hesitation. "Sugar Magnolia" was probably the most straight-forward piece in the symphony. In fact, several audience members applauded (somewhat in a reserved fashion, defying classical "etiquette") after its completion. "If I Had the World To Give" was also easy to follow and was the first light song in the symphony, with a playful, even fun, mood.

"Bird Song" had this same feeling of lightness. The song took on a different form through its orchestral manifestation; the original is not nearly as fluffy as this version.

"Blues for Allah" had a floozy, bluesy feel to it, especially in the beginning, until a cello's grace was introduced. It was interesting to hear Johnson make an orchestra sound bluesy, and I'd imagine this was one of the more difficult songs to play because of its countless variations—in tempo, rhythm, and intonation.

The last song, before closing with another variation of "Funiculi, Funicula," was "China Doll." It was beautiful, evoking chills. This was the first song heard by the composer while learning the music of the Dead that was an "a-ha" moment. It is here that I felt Johnson made full use of the orchestra and all its heaviness. The notes decline, descend, down, down, until a small but strong melody comes through, almost timidly. Any stereotypical Deadhead would probably cry, as some of us did, in fact.

Even when the melodies aren't recognizable, small pieces of them, or even feelings, will rise out of the songs to stir in one a nostalgic feeling. I didn't walk away from it feeling particularly happy or sad, but satisfied and full—more full of life than before I had heard it.

It made no difference whether one was a Deadhead or a fan of classical music, as we sat and listened. And as I gazed around at the audience, catching glimpses of men's silver ponytails, tie-dye shirts, and casual dress amid a larger sea of coats and ties, evening dresses, and the tony set, I couldn't help but recall one audience member saying at intermission, "The only thing missing here is the sweet smell of marijuana."

Attending with reviewer Michael Stamm were Tory Norwood (Stamm's girlfriend) and her mother Caroline Norwood (Julliard-Eastman School of Music graduate and recorded artist in four-hand piano).