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Music review: California Symphony plays Dead

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic
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No one ever accused the members of the Grateful Dead of not thinking big - multihour jam sessions are the proof of that - but the band's music has never been subjected to full symphonic treatment.

IMAGES



Courtesy California Symphony

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Composer Lee Johnson's Symphony No. 6, performed by the California Symphony on Tuesday night at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek, aims to rectify that oversight.

Actually, "symphonic" is something of a misnomer, if we take that term to suggest the kind of intricate thematic treatment favored by Beethoven, Bruckner and Shostakovich. Johnson's 50-minute opus is more of an orchestral suite, taking 10 songs from the Grateful Dead catalog and dressing them up in full orchestral regalia.

The results are varied and often alluring, although their effect probably depends a lot on a listener's prior relationship with the Dead's music. For fans who can hum along, the piece offers a beguiling new take on familiar material; for the rest, the piece sounds attractive but overextended.

There's certainly no denying the range and ingenuity of Johnson's treatments. The piece covers a lot of textural and orchestrational ground, from the Coplandesque string chorales of "Here Comes Sunshine" to the punchy, jaunty woodwind version of "Sugar Magnolia."

The broad, brass-dominated scoring for "Saint Stephen" makes a nice contrast to Johnson's string quartet arrangement of "If I Had the World to Give," which was beautifully rendered by the orchestra's principal string players, violinists Yasushi Ogura and Philip Santos, violist Marcel Gemperli and cellist Leighton Fong.

Johnson even throws in nods to the traditions and inside jokes of the Dead's concert career, including a brief stretch of orchestral improvisation in the "Stella Blue" section, and starting and ending the piece with a puckish little version of "Funiculi, Funicula," which was evidently a Jerry Garcia staple.

The performance made nods in the same direction, with Music Director Barry Jekowsky clad in a tie-dyed shirt beneath his tails, and a banner with the band's lightning-skull logo unfurled atop the stage.

None of it quite overcame the central problem of all such rock-classical hybrids, which is that the rhythmic profile so central to rock music inevitably sounds stiff and formal when delivered by a symphony orchestra. Still, the performance boasted its own lively power, and the melodic fluency of some of the band's best songs made itself felt.

The short second half of the program was devoted to a first-rate account of Stravinsky's

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