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REVIEW
California Symphony program gets a boost from poetry and dance

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[Ann Murphy, Special to The Chronicle](#)

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George Balanchine believed that once it was known that the young soldier in Igor Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du Soldat" played the violin, it would be obvious that the man was Russian. Had he been French, the choreographer said, he would have played the horn.

In the 1918 "L'Histoire," a lean, almost modular piece designed for the vagaries of wartime and rich in tango and ragtime, Stravinsky uses a single trumpet with bright delirium and girds it with a lone trombone. Carnival echoes of the 1911 "Petrouchka" ring out, and we can hear intimations of the honking brass lines that turn up later in "Les Noces." But Balanchine is right -- it is the violin that is at the heart of "L'Histoire," in both its music ensemble and for the young exhausted soldier, as it is the violin that leads the music and it's a violin that he sells to the devil for a few days' rest.

As part of the California Symphony's Program 3 at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek on Sunday -- featuring a guest appearance by Tina Kay Bohnstedt of the Diablo Ballet -- conductor Barry Jekowsky combined "L'Histoire" with another episodic, richly narrative work: William Walton's fey "Facade," a pièce d'occasion written in 1922 with poetry by Dame Edith Sitwell. Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings opened the program.

"L'Histoire," with only a snippet of dance and no eye to staging, fared less well than "Facade." ABC co-anchor Dan Ashley was the able lead narrator for the Stravinsky, joined by Jeffrey Draper as the Soldier and Keith Burkland as the Devil. The piece is scored for seven instruments, with each orchestral section compressed into one treble and one bass instrument, as in a jazz band. It was a watershed for the composer.

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" 'L'Histoire,' " he said, "marks my final break with the Russian orchestral school in which I had been fostered."

But in the symphony's performance, the spangly jazz rhythms grew dull, as much because of the onslaught of language as because of the demands of the music, leaving the narrators to bow under the weight of the morality tale.

Had the musicians been removed to the pit, with narrators to the side, dance could have enlivened and dramatized the score in numerous places, especially in such interludes as Three Dances, Waltz and Ragtime. The lovely Bohnstedt had only minutes of musically quixotic movement choreographed by Diablo Ballet Associate Director Victor Kabaniev, performed on the sliver of stage apron. If Kabaniev had followed Stravinsky's clear forms, and if, once onstage, Bohnstedt had been allowed to stay through the resolution of the tale, "L'Histoire du Soldat" would have been a less sorry story.

Walton's "Facade," scored for six instruments under Sitwell's gaze, is an insouciant pastiche of tango, fanfares, waltzes and yodeling songs, the whole as efflorescent as Stravinsky's composition is earthy.

The symphony did well to ignore the dance possibilities in "Facade," instead wrapping the work's verbal kinescope in gossamer music.

Singer Barbara Reynolds, along with actor Tim Reynolds, narrated the poems. Reynolds delivered the exaggerated meter and tongue-twisting declamations with musical verve. The skittering, slithering language did the work of 10 dancers.

California Symphony Program 3 —

Barber, Walton and Stravinsky: 8 p.m. today at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek. Tickets: \$37-\$57. (925) 943-7469 or www.tickets.com.

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