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Beyond the music: New World Symphony's 'New Work' is a multimedia feast

BY LAWRENCE BUDMEN

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The New World Symphony's annual spring "New Work" programs have explored intersections of music, film, dance and the spoken word. The most ambitious edition yet of this innovative series took place Saturday night at the New World Center in a high-tech, multimedia feast. With Michael Tilson Thomas presiding as conductor, host and co-creator, artistic values were consistently high, performances and production top drawer.

The program opened with the premiere of Sean Friar's *Two Solitudes*. Scored for the fascinating combination of flute, harp and viola, the work is a twenty-first century freeform reinvention of Impressionism. Diffuse thematic fragments cascade through the piece, the high flute line recalling Debussy's *Syrinx*. Splendidly crafted, this slowly evolving, moody vignette is both challenging and appealing. Henrik Heide was the superb protagonist, his flute agile and pure. Grace Browning's harp figures and glissandos were elegant and Anthony Parce's viola encompassed both richness and scraping astringency.

Cynthia Lee Wong's *Carnival Fever* is a co-commission of the New World, San Francisco Symphony and music publisher Boosey and Hawkes. Wong is the second recipient of this collaborative program to mentor young composers in creating orchestral works. Wong's piece is based on the Carnival at Rome episode from Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* in which a wild carnival follows a public execution.

The work is scored for large orchestra. Whistles precede lightning-fast fragments in strings and brass with a large percussion battery firing on all cylinders. Winds, harp and keyboards suggest the novel's darker aspects. Snappy and rambunctious, this showpiece is a terrific overture with a postmodern, cynical tone. Wong could not have wished for a better performance with Tilson Thomas and the orchestra in brilliant form.

An exhilarating audio-video presentation of the "Phorion" movement from Lukas Foss' Baroque Variations began with a film of New World violinist Hugh Palmer playing a virtuosic rendition of the Prelude from Bach's Partita in E Major, the basis of Foss's merry romp. (The film was deliberately filled with rips and fuzzy static to suggest the music's ancient origins.)

A wonderful demonstration of 1960s musical anarchy in the manner of John Cage, Foss deconstructs and transmogrifies Bach's familiar theme in a hallucinatory phantasmagoria. (Even the title is a witty allusion, phorion in Greek meaning 'stolen goods.') You have to love a work that plays Bach in the wrong key and meter, throws the theme between instrumental groupings, then turns on the electronics with a blasting rock finale featuring electric guitar and amplified percussion. Foss accomplishes all this with verve, humor and high style.

If ever there was a score that cried out for a visual component, Foss' nightmarish fantasy is it. The accompanying video installation by Adam Larsen (assisted by Tilson Thomas) and lighting by Luke Kritzeck captured the work's psychedelic, spaced-out mischievousness. Tilson Thomas is a master of this type of dense, complex score and he drew precise, vigorous and highly colored playing from the surround sound forces, which utilized all the terraces and platforms in the hall.

The program also featured poetry readings by Joshua Mehigan and Joe Tracz's short play The Next Thief, really a sitcom sketch with some help from E.T.A. Hoffman's The Sandman and John Cage's tinkling A Room, played wonderfully on prepared piano by Aya Yamamoto.

Re****Sitruuna ja meduusa, a film by Merja Nieminen and James Andean, mixed moving particles and shifting patterns with ambient sounds and bell tones to hypnotic effect. Only the New World Symphony at its creative best could present an evening as wide-ranging as this and pull it off successfully.

The New World Symphony season concludes with Michael Tilson Thomas conducting Mahler's Symphony No. 7. Performances are 8 p.m. May 3 and 2 p.m. May 4. nws.edu; 305-673-3331.