

## SFS explores Brahms' techniques and legacies of expressive rhythm

January 22, 2015

8:35 AM MST



Cynthia Lee Wong taking her bow after the performance of "Carnival Fever"

*by Kristen Loken, courtesy of the San Francisco Symphony*

Last night at Davies Symphony Hall, the [San Francisco Symphony](#) (SFS) programmed an imaginative coupling of the music of Johannes Brahms and Alban Berg, prefacing both of them with the West Coast premiere of "Carnival Fever" by the current New Voices composer Cynthia Lee Wong. This turned out to be an imaginative exploration in rhythmic techniques through the course of over a century. The pieces were performed in reverse chronological order, but the retrospective listener could recognize how each work on the program followed a path paved by its successor.

Brahms is seldom regarded as one blazing a trail into the twentieth century. However, ever one

to go against the flow, Arnold Schoenberg recognized the progressive nature of Brahms' compositional techniques and would eventually write about them at length. One of the techniques that Schoenberg seems to have overlooked, however, was the highly inventive capacity Brahms had for expressive rhythmic diversity.

That capacity was particularly evident in last night's selection, the Opus 83 (second) piano concerto in B-flat major. It almost seemed as if Brahms could never take a phrase and state it without at least one rhythmic twist. Often he would invent multiple concurrent twists, sometimes emerging through elegant polyrhythms. Last night's soloist, Yefim Bronfman, brought a finely-tuned clarity to all of his playing, whether in the foreground or providing a background context for the orchestral passages; and that clarity brought attention to Brahms' inventive rhythmic features that are often overlooked by lesser pianists concerned only with expressive themes and deftly executed cadenzas. Mind you, the themes and virtuoso passages were still there; but they shimmered in a light of rhythmic churning seldom encountered in Brahms concerto performances.

At the podium Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas (MTT) had a somewhat shaky start in tracking and enhancing Bronfman's appreciation of rhythmic detail; but, fortunately, that start was a brief one. Brahms' rhythmic technique also extended into the instrumental ensemble, but the ensemble work was also there to provide the metric pulse around which all that rhythmic diversity would unfold. On the orchestral side the high point comes in the third movement with an extended cello solo, performed last night by Michael Grebanier, so rich in expressive phrasing that Brahms would subsequently repurpose it for one of his songs.

The overall effect of both solo and orchestral resources was that of Brahms at his finest; and, if this is one of the most familiar piano [concertos](#) in the repertoire, it emerged with the freshness of music being really encountered for the first time.

As might be guessed, Schoenberg can be viewed as one of the links between Brahms and Berg. However, where Berg's music is concerned, one should also consider Gustav Mahler as another link. In many respects Mahler took the full breadth of Brahms' imaginative approaches to rhythm and pushed their boundaries to a further distance from that central metric pulse. In the three orchestral pieces of Berg's Opus 6, one has a clear sense of Berg doing unto Mahler what Mahler had done unto Brahms. Furthermore, Berg could take Mahler's imaginative approaches to instrumentation as a point of departure for providing new coloration for his rhythmic inventiveness.

Two of the pieces amount to extended fantasias on familiar metric patterns, the waltz in the second piece and the march in the third. These are preceded by a prelude in which sounds emerge only gradually out of silence within a thick texture whose rhythms often unfold in lines

that cross from one instrument to another. The overall rhetoric is rife with nightmarish qualities, another dimension of Mahler's angst-ridden influences. However, that rhetorical stance can only emerge from a solid foundation of logical organization. That foundation can be traced back to Brahms; and as was the case in Brahms, Berg uses that foundation as a loom to weave textures in which every detail counts, sometimes because every thread has its own unique rhythmic identity.

In his work on the podium, MTT labored admirably to allow those of us on audience side to recognize each of those threads and savor the individuality of its contribution to the whole. On the other hand his attentiveness to that rhythmic diversity seemed, at least on occasions, to lead to a bit of neglect where the underlying pulse was concerned. While the march is a mosaic of short fragments, each of which is a familiar trope from past marches, there still needs to be some sense of a procession taking place. To pursue that metaphor, MTT's attention to the tiles sometimes seems to have lost track of the overall image; and that problem also surfaced from time to time in the waltz piece. Only the prelude emerged with a convincingly solid account of the relationship between parts and whole.

That prelude was performed immediately after Joshua Gersen conducted "Carnival Fever;" and, while it was more implicit than explicit, the connection was easy to savor. If Berg's music had the qualities of a mosaic, Wong's was more of a kaleidoscope, a tumble of rhythmic fragments crowded together, bumping against each other, and emerging as larger patterns through multiple reflections. However, if Berg eased you into his designs by gradually emerging from silence, Wong drops you right in the middle from her opening measures.

Indeed, the shock is so great that mind may be hard pressed to recognize the order within the chaos, so to speak. Fortunately, Wong drew upon a song-like structural framework in which mind gradually became aware of a "chorus" recurring between the elaborate excursions of "verse" sections. One might say that this was music that provided its own technique for gradual acclimation. On the other hand that description could also be held to Berg's orchestral pieces and, with little stretch of the imagination, Brahms' concerto. "Carnival Fever" thus created the impression that Wong had taken up a torch that had been carried over considerable distances by several significant bearers; and the ground she has covered with that torch has left a strong impression. Indeed, if this piece gets more exposure (which it rightly deserves), it may yet make that an indelible impression.



**Stephen Smoliar**  
SF Classical Music Examiner