

S.F. Symphony review: An eloquent, fervent Berg

By **Joshua Kosman** Published 1:07 pm, Thursday, January 22, 2015



Yefim Bronfman

When **Michael Tilson Thomas** sets up a performance by announcing that this is one of his favorite pieces, that may or may not be significant — after all, the man commands an astonishingly wide range of repertoire. But to conduct something as phenomenally eloquent as Wednesday's **San Francisco Symphony** performance of Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra is a mark of true love.

One obvious source of that affection is the fact that the Three Pieces, composed in 1914-15, is probably the most overt statement of Berg's debt to Mahler, who had died in 1911. There are explicit references to the work of the older composer in quotations from the Ninth Symphony and in the use of the gigantic hammer that plays such an important role in the Sixth.

But the connections run far deeper than that, because Berg's entire harmonic framework and his formal approach are like extensions of the directions that Mahler had been pointing toward

in his final compositions, the Ninth Symphony and the unfinished Tenth. As Thomas aptly pointed out in his spoken remarks, Berg's musical triptych is like a collision of Mahler's unwritten Eleventh and Twelfth Symphonies.

And Wednesday's performance in Davies Symphony Hall boasted all the power and fevered urgency that have marked the orchestra's finest forays into Mahler. The first movement, marked "Praeludium," built with wonderful assurance from its hesitant, fragmentary opening to a sensual whirl in which Thomas established a firm but freewheeling rhythmic pace.

Dance figures heavily in the second movement as well, as the music dips in and out of the waltzes that define musical Vienna, and which Berg treats with a loving skepticism that outstrips even Mahler's ironic sensibility. And in the final movement, tiny snippets of march music try to coalesce in the shadow of the huge hammer strokes that ultimately come crashing down on the musical texture.

All these strains and more — particularly Berg's resourceful and evocative use of the orchestra — came through in this reading. When Thomas and the Symphony musicians are all moving together as one, through sparse soundscapes and massed musical onslaughts, the effect can be transfixing. Wednesday's concert was one of those nights.

The excitement continued unabated after intermission, as pianist **Yefim Bronfman** joined the orchestra for a brilliant, full-bodied rendition of Brahms' Second Piano Concerto. Bronfman has been (among other things) such a reliably splendid Brahmsian presence in Davies over the years that one can only say that this performance was on a par with its predecessors — thunderous, nimble and full of intricacies brought out and illuminated.

Bronfman sounded especially at home in the first movement, pounding out the concerto's thick chords and expansive passagework with the mastery of an athlete. Yet there was lyricism and grace at work in the slow third movement as well — helped along by a beautiful solo from principal cellist **Michael Grebanier** — and dexterous wit in the light-footed finale.

The evening began with **Cynthia Lee Wong**'s "Carnival Fever," a bright, spangly entertainment that didn't so much raise the curtain as whisk it up breathlessly. Wong is the most recent participant in New Voices, the orchestra's commissioning project together with the **New World Symphony**, and her nine-minute score, inspired by a scene from Dumas' "Count of Monte Cristo," conjures up a street celebration in Rome.

In doing so, Wong draws on some favorite musical street scenes of old, most notably Act 2 of Puccini's "La Bohème," Stravinsky's "Petrouchka" and Gershwin's "An American in Paris" — all

of which pass by quickly as if on a crowded thoroughfare. Joshua Gersen, deputizing for Thomas, led a vividly colored account.

Joshua Kosman is The San Francisco Chronicle's music critic. E-mail: jkosman@sfnchronicle.com Twitter: @JoshuaKosman

San Francisco Symphony: 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 23. \$15-\$140. Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Ave., S.F. (415) 864-6000. www.sfsymphony.org.

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