

SYMPHONY REVIEW
**A Cataclysm As Magnum Opus,
And Chang's Sensibilities**

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By Thomas Goss

Take a clumsy, noisy rehearsal of *Le Sacre du printemps*. Subtract anything slow or eerie. Add the climax from every monster movie soundtrack you've ever heard, playing duo and trio. Throw in a couple of train wrecks for good measure, with a dash of earthquake and aerial raid. Now you're close to the impact of Edgard Varèse's *Ameriques*, as conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas at Davies Hall last Friday night.

But wait, that's not all. It's not merely that the piece was groundbreaking in the literal sense, that is, expecting the floor to split open and swallow the first three rows. Tilson Thomas brought out what was truly significant about Varèse's magnum opus: a craft, wit, and originality of form reminiscent of Picasso or Bracques rather than Stravinsky. It was the endless variety of tonal color that justified the mass of over 120 musicians onstage, not necessarily a need to be louder than any other piece ever written for orchestra.

And color and invention abounded. A tutti tone cluster rose from a whisper to a scream, pushing the air from the front of the stage into our faces, or so it felt. Choirs within sections battled for mock supremacy, then melted into one another. I could feel the composer's childlike delight with noise-making combining seamlessly with an expert ear for the balance of convening chaos. The piece still comes on as fresh and daring as the day it was written, and illustrates the fascination that Varèse held for composers from Boulez to Zappa.

In any such operation, it is, naturally, the percussion section that takes the front rank in the assault. The nine-member platoon discharged its duties with thoroughly musical alacrity. Cymbals and whips, chimes and castanets, rattles and gongs, xylos and glocks, sleigh bells and triangles, all made their tumultuous contributions to the cannonade. But of course it was the hapless lion's roar specialist, Ward Spangler, who drew the eye of the audience as he manfully turned the crank of this unforgiving and unwieldy sonic behemoth. Its kvetching drone seemed more than dyspeptic, but it made people laugh. And when was the last time that happened in the middle of a "serious music" concert?

The Prokofiev Violin Concerto No. 1 served as an unashamedly quiet and introspective prelude to this irrepressible blurt. It was an apt vehicle for Sarah Chang's small, intimate sound and delicate sensibilities. Prokofiev's concerti can be as treacherous as Ravel's, in that the composer is the true voice, leaving a precarious interpretative tightrope for the soloist to tread. Too individual a

performance can seem merely idiosyncratic, whereas a slavish surrender to the composer's intentions will come off coldly.

Yet Chang transcended the whole equation with enormous sensitivity and grace, accomplishing far more with understatement than even the composer might have expected. Still, the soloist and her orchestra felt a little disconnected in the first movement, and didn't seem truly to engage until the flurrious, furious Scherzo vivacissimo of a middle movement forced the reluctant parties into a covenant.

The third movement was distilled, purified musical ecstasy. Tilson Thomas kept the tick-tock rhythm from obtruding on the landscape unnecessarily, with the happy result that the wind solos emerged from the canvas with a clarity that seemed chamber-like in conjunction with Chang's rhapsodic interpretation of the solo line.

Prokofiev's score uses the most minimal of orchestral resources: doubled winds, two trumpets, and no trombones. But the amount of texture squeezed from the reduced ensemble feels as dense at times as a larger complement while still leaving room for wonderful moments like tuba player Floyd Cooley's descending solo under a building series of impassioned statements and trills from Chang as the orchestra turns tick into heartfelt pulse.

The concert programming appeared to be an exercise in penultimacy: loudest modern work, most intense Soviet violin concerto, what else? The opening piece, Debussy's *Images pour orchestre*, answers the question with that composer's longest and most ingenious work, not a set of tone-poems but virtually a concerto for orchestra. It was presented as a tribute to the enormous quality of this world-class ensemble, as solos and duos leapt from stand to stand, providing nearly every musician in the orchestra a chance to be heard on his or her own terms.

The last-minute change of order in having the three-part movement "Iberia" come last instead of second showed the dangers of placing "Gigues" and "Rondes de Printemps" side by side. The somber passages in the latter seemed occasionally sulky when preluded by the un-jigging Gigue. But all was forgiven when the tempo and mood picked up, showing that the attitude and effervescence of the score was not just written on the page but was in the fingers and souls of the players.