

SYMPHONY REVIEW
Encompassing Lou
Harrison's Esthetic

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By Thomas Goss

At the San Francisco Symphony's American Mavericks tribute to Lou Harrison last Thursday night, the Archangel Michael (Tilson Thomas) seemed at times to be talking directly to the image of Harrison projected onto the screen hanging above the orchestra as composer and conductor exchanged encouragement and wry banter, old chums sharing a moment of fun. And then when MTT raised his arms to conduct, worlds came into being for our ears.

Lou Harrison has a harmless, humble face for a maverick. The joy of sharing his inspiration animates it, makes his aged, approachable features glow with boyish exuberance. A lifetime of creativity informs it, an intuition and craft of timing, wit, and intellect that carry forward his convictions and observations while he speaks. Blown up to such huge proportions on the giant screen, his face resembles that of a creator of worlds presiding over a chorus of angels, explaining in offhand and charming tones the cosmogonic task he is about to set them. Uncommon for a composer, he wasted no words in setting up each work, aside from a few comically conspiratorial asides and some intriguing history on the creation of some new percussion instruments.

Harrison has lived long enough to discover what is inalterably interesting and captivating to the ear. His modal approach to harmony, when combined with a penchant for unceasing melodic flow, weaved highly visual and sensual tapestries of sound. Narrative without being programmatic, descriptive without being cinematic, his music is a sharp lesson for those convinced that tonal music has run its course. After listening to his music, it seemed the surface has barely been scratched.

Yet Harrison's muse appeared less deeply engaged in the long, lyric Third Symphony or in the flashy Organ Concerto than in the *Suite for Violin with American Gamelan*, under the fingers of Chee-Yun. The intensity of the violin writing in this piece, co-composed with Richard Dee, was on the level normally associated with concerto repertory, except that there were few if any breaks for the soloist. Chee-Yun shared the stage with an orchestra of only six percussionists, MTT conducting. They filled the hall with sound.

Chee-yun's playing in the opening Threnody of this impassioned elegy was rich, plaintive, and sonorous, with the gamelan ensemble making small but carefully poised comments. The effect was both moving and unsettling. The following Estampie showed another side of her virtuosity: she was brilliant, inventive, and convincing as the notes literally stampeded along. The Air combined the best of both Western and Eastern music as the violin serenaded the audience, first as gypsy fiddle and then as Chinese *erhu*.

The accompanying percussion for the most part served to connect passages of melodic dazzle, occasionally thumping alongside the gamelan frames in a most unflattering whack. It wasn't until the third Jahla that the ensemble played alone, a soft dreamy melody, sounding like a little windup toy under deep water. The concluding Chaconne maintained the strategy of blending musical origins, recalling languid impressionism in places against a starker pentatonic frame. The slower pace lacked none of the excitement that had preceded it. The six-man gamelan filled the hall like a full orchestra as the violin soared to the conclusion.

The rest of the concert was an equal, if less climactic, delight. The Third Symphony, whose composition spanned a period of 45 years, seemed to encompass the wide and wild territory of Harrison's aesthetic. Long, lush melodies evolved and spun out over a slow-groove ostinato. A scherzo divided itself up into three overwhelmingly offbeat dance movements, a Waltz, a Reel, and an Estampie. Solos and choruses of instruments engaged in wondering, innocent discourse between powerfully stated declamations. A finale cruised with a ceaseless flurry of motion and emotion, shamelessly modal, beautifully orchestrated, with glocks and vibes and the kitchen sink in the back row emerging from the sweeping bestringed texture.

The Organ Concerto opened and closed like the door to a funhouse, outrageous, funny, and bewildering, with bent and wavy mirrors. The full array of Harrison's homemade percussion decked the stage, including oxygen tanks, square plywood boxes, and do-it-yourself gongs. Organist John Walker shuttled back and forth from white-key to black-key tone clusters with a block of wood in his right hand. The resulting tonal masses trumpeted in opposition to, then in cohesion with, the bash and crash created by the eight assembled percussionists. This piece, particularly in its slower middle movements, broke ranks with the modalities of the rest of the program into a cherubic disregard for tonality. Harrison, in the universe of his own creation, is not unlike the creator of the universe in which he resides -- full of energetic surprises!