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Review: Cabrillo Festival opens a new season amid a warm rush of camaraderie



Joshua Kosman | August 6, 2023 Updated: August 7, 2023, 10:18 am



Music Director Cristian Macelaru leads the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium Photo: RR Jones

SANTA CRUZ – Every summer, orchestral players and music lovers gather at the [Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music](#) for two weeks' worth of new and recent offerings played at the highest level.

But one theme that emerged from the first two concerts of the festival's opening weekend Friday and Saturday, Aug. 4-5, in the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, was that the performances themselves – powerful as they often are – are only the most visible elements that make Cabrillo special.

For the duration of the festival, which runs through Sunday, Aug. 13, an entire microcosm springs up around the proceedings, devoted not only to new music, but also to camaraderie and a shared sense of adventure that encompasses the musicians and the audiences alike. Even a listener making lightning visits from farther north, as I've been doing for years, can feel how the festival's welcoming warmth spills out beyond the confines of the hall.



Composer Sarah Kirkland Snider opened Friday night's Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music concert with her tenderly rapturous tone poem "Forward Into Light."

Photo: RR Jones

New Jersey-based composer Sarah Kirkland Snider, opening Friday night's concert with remarks in advance of her tenderly rapturous tone poem "Forward Into Light," seemed to have been caught off guard in her first visit at finding the festival such a haven for artistic enterprise. On Saturday, principal clarinetist Bharat Chandra, who plays with the Sarasota Orchestra in Florida and the Nordic Symphony Orchestra in Tallinn, Estonia, spoke movingly of his proprietary feelings about the festival, before acknowledging that everyone involved with it had similar emotions.

Much of that spirit, for the past 30 years and more, has been fostered by Ellen Primack, who steps down as executive director at the end of this year's festival. Both concerts were studded with words of appreciation for Primack's commitment to music, her resourcefulness in getting things done and her deeply rooted connection to the Santa Cruz community.



Composer Jennifer Higdon introduces her "Duo Duel," a percussion concerto co-commissioned by the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music.

Photo: RR Jones

Next weekend's concerts will include a work commissioned in her honor from the British composer Anna Clyne, as well as two pieces by festival co-founder Robert Hughes, who **died last year** – a wonderfully apt celebration of this cultural landmark's long and varied history.

But first, Music Director Cristian Măcelaru led the orchestra in two programs packed with music that was both accessible and rewarding. The orchestra, a conglomeration of musicians from around the country who assemble year after year, played with the improbable unanimity and power of a permanent ensemble, and Măcelaru's programming found cunning connections among the pieces.

Some of those connections, granted, were reasonably overt. Two big percussion concertos, by American composers Jennifer Higdon and Tan Dun, anchored the two evenings with explosive displays that were excitingly athletic if sometimes glib.



Percussionist Beibei Wang performs Tan Dun's concerto "The Tears of Nature" at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music.

Photo: RR Jones

Higdon's "Duo Duel," a festival co-commission featuring percussionists Svet Stoyanov, a founding member of the Percussion Collective, and Matthew Strauss of the Houston Symphony, found the two soloists racing one another up and down the marimba and vibraphone keyboards like a latter-day version of the tap legends the Nicholas Brothers. In Tan Dun's concerto "The Tears of Nature," the Chinese virtuoso Beibei Wang held forth on an arsenal of percussion instruments that included rocks and the stage floor in addition to more traditional apparatus.

But there were other ways in which different composers seemed to be approaching parallel trains of thought. Two Korean American composers, Bora Yoon and Peter Shin, explored musical artifacts from their cultural heritage – military marches and K-pop in the case of Yoon's "The Wind of Two Koreas," and a children's song in the case of Shin's brusque and fascinating "Relapse."



Composer Peter Shin takes a bow after the performance of his "Relapse" at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music Photo: RR Jones

Carlos Simon's four-movement "Tales – A Folklore Symphony" drew on musical and narrative tropes from the African American church in which he grew up. Those included a myth that until slavery, Africans had the ability to fly – a tale magically evoked by the sound of flapping gloves and the spiritual "Steal Away," and a brassy, oracular reimagining of "Go Down Moses."

From there it was a short step to the fairy-tale pictorialism of "Water Sings Fire," a marvelously dark and affecting work by the American composer Andrea Reinkemeyer. The piece is based on a short story by the Israeli American author Leigh Bardugo that proposes an origin story for the sea witch Ulla in Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Little Mermaid" (known to Disney buffs as Ursula). Here, Reinkemeyer's writing plunges the listener into the watery depths with an emphasis on the orchestra's low-pitched instruments.



Composer Carlos Simon's four-movement "Tales – A Folklore Symphony" draws on musical and narrative tropes from the African American church in which he grew up.

Photo: RR Jones

For at least some concertgoers, Beethoven's music is as central as the stories of our childhood, and Sebastian Currier's "Track 8" – a witty and inventive gloss on the composer's Eighth Symphony – plays on that familiarity. Over four movements that twin with Beethoven's, Currier fuses the well-known strains with his contemporary sensibilities to produce a musical hybrid that gives both veins full play.

Măcelaru made a few remarks about his artistic investment in all the pieces he conducts, but the performances spoke even more eloquently than he could. Each work was delivered with a combination of clarity, rigor and sensitivity that made it shine, and the results seemed suffused with the inner glow that gives Cabrillo its distinctive personality.



Composer Sebastian Currier introduces his "Track 8," a musical gloss on Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, at the Cabrillo Festival for Contemporary Music Photo: RR Jones

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More Information

Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music: 7 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Aug. 12-13. \$20-\$75.

Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St., Santa Cruz. www.cabrillomusic.org

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Joshua Kosman

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Joshua Kosman has covered classical music for the San Francisco Chronicle since 1988, reviewing and reporting on the wealth of orchestral, operatic, chamber and contemporary music throughout the Bay Area.

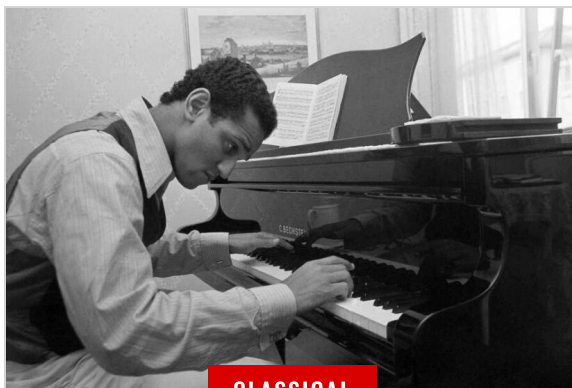
He is the co-creator of the weekly cryptic crossword puzzle "[Out of Left Field](#)," and has repeatedly placed among the top 20 contestants at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

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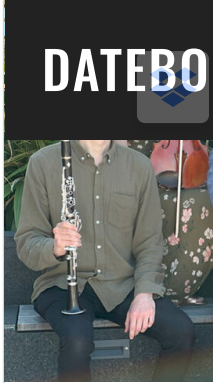
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