

Classical music review: Minnesota Orchestra's 'Future Classics' gives, and gets, enthusiasm

By David Hawley Special to the Pioneer Press TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press

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Can you bring in a crowd for a concert of brand-new classical music?

You can if the concert is adroitly showcased like the Minnesota Orchestra's annual "Future Classics" event. This is the fourth year for the concert, which was added in 2006 by music director Osmo Vanska to an annual workshop for professional composers that has existed in several formats since the mid-1990s.

It has developed into a quasi-cult experience. Orchestra Hall wasn't packed on Saturday for the performance of works by seven young composers, but it was a respectable crowd that lowered the average older-age demographic for patrons of orchestra concerts by at least a decade and contributed a lot of enthusiasm to the proceedings.

By now, the format has become standardized. The works have to be short enough to squeeze all of them and some on-stage commentary into one evening, which means most are fewer than 10 minutes in length and no more than 15. Considering the paucity of opportunities for new-work performances by first-string orchestras, it's also not surprising that composers tend to stretch for as much colorful texture and thick-sounding effects as possible. No minimalism here.

Nonetheless, the audience favorite Saturday was Kathryn Salfelder's "Dessin No. 1," a tranquil, conventionally harmonic piece that came in the second half of the program after a number of works that were considerably more robust and thickly layered.

Not that the contrast was less interesting. Fernando Buide's "Antiphones," a highly rhythmical piece, featured lush low strings and flickering winds, including a compelling oboe voice.

Spencer Topel's "Incendio" sizzled with a fractured kind of repeating ostinato and lots of crash and bang. Roger Zare's "Aerodynamics," with its interesting five-note theme, grew from an opening that sounded like a tonal blanket.

The other works included Carl Schimmel's "Woolgatherer's Chapbook," an eight-minute piece in six sections with unusual contrasts and an odd ending that sort of dripped away. The final work, Geoff Knorr's "Shadows of the Infinite," was bombastic, with a kind of Brucknerian finish of endless big cadences.

The concert opened with Chinese composer Angel Lam's "In Search of Seasons," a kind of take on the famous Vivaldi concerto, but with a much more plaintive undertone. To me, it was an unusually affecting piece, filled with luxuriant chords, tender string songs and sensuous glissandos.

The future continues to be made.