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Asia's adventurous Fifth gets rousing premiere in Oro Valley

By Cathalena E. Burch

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ORO VALLEY — Tucson composer Daniel Asia remarked last week that his Symphony No. 5 is "pretty damn intriguing."

That proved to be an understatement when the Tucson Symphony Orchestra gave it its world premiere Friday with the Greater Oro Valley Arts Council.

The 37-minute symphony, conducted by George Hanson, is at times sublimely accessible, with interludes of lush melodic string passages. But it is a piece in constant flux, shuddering with nervous convulsions of clatter and clang, some that makes perfect sense, some that will have you scratching your head wondering if Asia was making a bold, musical statement that escaped you.

The choral symphony is broken into 15 songs taken from the Old Testament Psalms and the poems of American Paul Pines and Israeli Yehuda Amichai. Two of the three Psalms are sung in Hebrew — which the TSO Chorus managed to pull off with admirable diction. The poetry was sung by guest soloists, tenor Robert Swensen, who teaches at the University of Arizona; and baritone Kelly Anderson, who has appeared with opera companies around the country including the Arizona Opera.

The piece opens with a percussive crash as the chorus, pressed against the back wall of the Canyon del Oro High School Auditorium stage, sang Psalm 115 in Hebrew. Silent string passages were interrupted by the dissonant clank of the triangle and rumble from the timpani. Timpanist Kimberly Toscano was squeezed between the bass and brass sections while the rest of the percussion section was on the opposite side of the stage. The arrangement created an appealing surround-sound effect that resounded with every boom.

A lovely melody that included ethereal harp and solemn strings introduced Swensen's first solo turn, Pines' "The Baal Shem Tov." Anderson, whose resonating baritone was among the highlights of the performance, had his first turn with Amichai's "God's Hand in the World," a song that introduces itself with percussive jolts that knocked melodic string passages out of whack. It was not entirely unpleasant, but it was unexpected.

The soloists traded off on the minutes-long mini-movements. Midway through the symphony, the chorus sang Psalm 23, which is set against a backdrop of sweet strings teased by a roaring timpani and the clank of the triangle.

Asia's Symphony No. 5 earned polite applause from the nearly sold-out audience of 510. A handful of younger audience members in the back shouted "Yeah!"

This was undoubtedly the largest showing of the TSO that the GOVAC crowd has ever experienced. GOVAC's TSO MasterWorks series usually hosts a much smaller chamber orchestra. For this concert, the TSO brought along at least 60 musicians cramped into the center, and a big chunk of its chorus. From the audience it seemed a tight fit.

Asia's Fifth was commissioned by the Tucson chapter of the America Israel Friendship League to commemorate Israel's 60th anniversary. The Israel premiere will be next July with the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra.

Review

Tucson Symphony Orchestra MasterWorks concert Friday at Canyon del Oro High School. Concert, featuring the TSO Chorus and guest soloists, repeats at 2 p.m. Sunday at Catalina Foothills High School, 4300 E. Sunrise Drive.

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