

Breathing life into myth at Cabrillo Festival

Conductor Kenneth Harrison and the Cabrillo Music Festival players offered a unique pair of programs Saturday — a free afternoon concert of orchestral music inspired by the Orpheus legend followed by an evening percussion showcase featuring the music of Lou Harrison and John Cage.

The Orpheus program took place at Holy Cross Church where lively acoustics engulfed the audience in a resonance conducive for the wordless storytelling.

The concert burst open with a set of unannounced Renaissance brass pieces by Grillo and Gabrielli. In keeping with the antiphonal charm of the music, one quartet played from the altar and the other from the rear organ loft with Kenneth Harrison conducting from the center.

The four views of Orpheus spanned four centuries, beginning with Monteverdi's "Sinfonie et Ritornelli" from "Orfeo" (1607) followed by the most recent adaptation, "Looking At Orpheus Looking" by Gerhard Samuel (1971). Following intermission came Gluck's incidental music to "Orpheo ed Euridice" (1762), and the concert concluded with Stravinsky's "Orpheus" (1947).

Claudio Monteverdi's "Orfeo" is considered to be the first opera composed and it is truly one of the most beautiful. Saturday's performance was a selection of five instrumental movements skillfully arranged for modern string orchestra by Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882-1973). Harrison led the ensemble with a sensitive restraint, invoking the shades through minimal strokes. The strings played with a clear and noble sound that drew the audience into legend. The lyric power of these pure songs breathed life into myth and Orpheus' gift endures.

The entire Festival orchestra was called forth for the next work "Looking At

Orpheus Looking" by Samuel, former music director of the Cabrillo Festival. The music maintained an atmosphere of stillness over and through a wealth of rich imagery. There were strands of delicate remembrances juxtaposed with unison tones of brutal immediacy.

Two-hundred years and an intermission following Monteverdi's "Orfeo," the world of opera was again revamped, this time by Gluck with his opera "Orfeo ed Euridice." A reduced orchestra of woodwinds and strings performed three dance movements: Overture, Dance of the Blessed Spirits and Dance of the Furies.

The two outer allegro movements were played with animated spirit and precision. The middle movement was a lullaby and featured the fine flute playing of Lawrence Duckles.

Stravinsky's ballet score "Orpheus" (1947) incorporates qualities of both classicism and the Renaissance. The work is divided into three tableaux, although the music never fully cadences until the end.

Harrison and the orchestra realized the complex tempo relationships necessary to maintain the work's equilibrium. Through a language of austere restraint, Stravinsky conveys all shades of life imaginable at that time. From the opening descent of the solo harp, a solemn ethereal atmosphere prevails. In the final tableau the harp returns, slowly ascending through veils of French horns, lifting the lyre of Orpheus into the heavens.

The program concept of this concert was intriguing in its juxtaposition of styles on the same theme.

The focus moved to the Cabrillo Theater Saturday evening. There the Festival celebrated its 20th anniversary with the fundamental vibrations of its annual

percussion concert.

A vast arsenal of instruments stretched across the stage, reflecting the geographic range of the instruments present. The gamut included gongs, cymbals, drums, pipes, blocks, bells, bowls (and even pianos) from Europe, Asia and the Americas. There were also plenty of "found instruments," objects retrieved from daily life, junkyards and wastebaskets.

The concert featured the music of Lou Harrison and John Cage. It focused on the period of the strongest collaboration between the two longtime colleagues who began their working relationship in the early '30s.

Harrison and Cage became familiar with the diverse musics of non-European cultures through their study with composer Henry Cowell. This influence opened up new possibilities of timbral resources that inspired a large body of percussion music.

It was during the late '30s that they began producing concerts of their music together, presenting pieces composed for "found instruments" such as brake drums, garbage cans, buzzers, tin cans and whatever else was available. Their explorations were in part, responses to economic limitation and unsatisfactory performance conditions. However, the most significant incentive and result was the unveiling of an entirely fresh gamut of sound.

The performers of this program, David Rosenthal, William Winant, Todd Manley and Ray Bechand, were outstanding. Under the baton of Kenneth Harrison, the ensemble executed the works with accuracy and kinetic commitment.

The program began with Lou Harrison's "Tributes To Charon," a piece in two movements. The first was "Passage

Through Darkness" (1982), a miniature concerto for two alarm clocks. The second movement "Counterdance In The Spring" (1939) was a light dance punctuated with abrupt rhythmic unisons.

Lou Harrison's "Song Of Quetzalcoatl" (1941) calls for four percussionists, preferably with ten hands. Constructed of Aztec melodies and utilizing a variety of timbres, the piece begins with a peaceful selection of bells and gongs. With the introduction of muted drums there follows a fiery song, rich with transparent counterpoint over a relentless pulse. The four separate parts culminate in a unison climax after which the opening material returns and leads to quiet repose.

The ensemble decided it was time for a little comic relief and provided it with Cage's "Credo In Us" (1942), a work for percussion (including prepared piano) and radio or phonograph. Continuity can be achieved in many ways. Imagine eight bars from the opening Dvorak's "New World" Symphony followed by a frenetic tin can drum solo, a dash of prepared piano and an electric buzzer. In a collage of such diverse references Cage managed to make an engaging work of satire that lasted 12 minutes.

Following the intermission, the ensemble played a tremendously demanding work by Cage entitled "Third Construction" (1941). The complex interplay of parts required that each player be both autonomous and yet in time with the others. The performers rose above technical preoccupation and conveyed the music brilliantly. The work is perhaps Cage's finest percussion piece, marvelously visceral and expressive.

Overall, though, the concert included some of the most neglected and innovative music of our time.

— Philip Collins