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Review: California Symphony closes out season with a double bang

By Richard Scheinin
San Jose Mercury News

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Sunday's ambitious and rewarding concert by the California Symphony featured brand new music by a 33-year-old composer with a skyrocketing national reputation — and a parallel career as a DJ. It also featured a 14-year-old pianist with startling virtuoso skills.

Yet the matinee audience at the Leshner Center for the Arts was a typical one for classical performances. Almost everyone attending was over 50, if not 60. Composer Mason Bates' contemporaries — who might have enjoyed his exquisitely trippy "Silicon Blues" — were largely absent. And where were the children — only a handful attended — who would have been bowled over by the talents of pianist Sarina Zhang?

The players and managers of the California Symphony — who are negotiating to restructure their organization and balance their teetering budget — are probably asking the same question. But rather than get caught up in competing theories about the graying demographics of this and other arts organizations, I'll just urge people of all ages to attend Tuesday night's repeat performance at the Leshner Center of Sunday's program, the last one of

the season.

Act 1 revolved around Oakland-based Bates, recently appointed as a composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. With "Silicon Blues," he wraps up his three-year residency with the California Symphony, where his past works have merged computer-generated sounds into the orchestral scores. Bates (whose club moniker is DJ Masonic) has even been known to perform as soloist on his laptop.

Sunday, dressed like Tom Wolfe in a white linen suit, Bates told the audience that he has gone "unplugged" with the new piece, using the purely acoustic orchestra to mimic the "rhythms and sonorities I imagine coming out of a silicon chip." He has included a typewriter in the percussion section and uses a prepared piano to generate the gentle plinks and thuds of his silicon world.

It's a modest work, about 12 minutes long, a charmer moving seamlessly through three parts. The first bubbles along delicately: warm pulses and sonorities, pop-inspired cadences and fanfares, with a bit of bite from muted brass. The second part shimmers like a jellyfish in the dark; it's those gonging reverberations and shimmering string harmonics. The third part again ramps up the pulsing, chirping (and perhaps "twittering") silicon dance-floor moves.

As a whole, the work feels related in particular to early '70s pop — there are riffs reminiscent of "Shaft" — and to the very American optimism of Copland and certain California sun-drenched works by John Adams. Listening to it, I felt as if I were inside a beautiful bubble — wearing headphones. Three years into their ride, Bates, the orchestra and conductor Barry Jekowsky are simpatico.

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Sunday's Act 2 was given over to Zhang, whose performance of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 was rather astonishing: those bracing chords, flying octaves, steady trills and glittering passagework, flounciness as the red ribbons in her hair. Her cadenzas were filled with velvet cascades of notes; she was all over this work.

With time, Zhang's expressiveness will grow deeper. But already she has all the tools. And she is an effective listener, attentive to Jekowsky's tempos, merging in and out of the orchestra's warm glow.

After intermission, she returned — this time, with her cello, as the soloist for Tchaikovsky's "Pezzo Capriccioso" for Cello and Orchestra. Before she began, Jekowsky paid her a compliment: "I don't think we're going to find another one like you." The cello, of course, is more difficult to control than the piano, and her pitch and articulation weren't spot on. Still, it was more than impressive that Zhang — who grew up in San Diego and now studies in New York — could even get through this technically withering showpiece. And that she had performed virtuoso works for two different instruments.

Finally, there was Act 3: Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. Jekowsky led a performance of steady momentum that kept pushing through to points of bristling tension. There were distractions: i.e. shaky intonation in the violins during quiet passages throughout. But, in the end, this performance of the warhorse was unhackneyed and often stirring.

Incidentally, the orchestra has secured a \$150,000 challenge grant and is eager to have it matched by donors. Contributions to the California Symphony can be made online at www.californiasymphony.org (click on "support"). For more information, call 925-280-2490

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REVIEW

WHO: Composer-DJ Mason Bates and pianist-cello Sarina Zhang

WHAT: California Symphony

WHERE: Leshner Center for the Arts, Civic and Locust, Walnut Creek

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

HOW MUCH: \$20-\$64

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