

Berkeley Symphony previews a 'Frankenstein' opera



Photo: Jeff Fasano

Joshua Kosman | on May 6, 2016

Movie audiences get trailers of coming attractions, and some folks treasure those as a key part of the moviegoining experience. So why should classical music lovers be left out?

“Frankenstein,” a new opera by Bay Area composer **Mark Grey**, isn’t due for its world premiere in Brussels until a future date that appears to be still unsettled. But in the meantime, **Joana Carneiro** and the Berkeley Symphony concluded their season in Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall on Thursday night, May 5, with Grey’s “Frankenstein Symphony,” which offered an inviting foretaste of the full work to come.

Like a movie trailer, Grey's 35-minute orchestral work is assembled out of some of the choice scenes from the full offering, arranged not in narrative order but so as to make things feel all the more alluring. Listening to these selections — which are robust enough to stand on their own, yet still teasingly partial in their dramatic effect — made a cogent argument for the virtues of the opera.

Grey's five movements touch on a few of the obvious narrative cruxes of the story, which according to the composer sets the events of **Mary Shelley's** classic novel as a flashback from several centuries in the future. There is an wonderfully atmospheric opening movement in which the monster is thawed out from the Arctic ice where Shelley left him, and reanimated into a futuristic world.

There is a poignant and sweetly lyrical interlude depicting the ties between Victor Frankenstein and his beloved Elizabeth. Busy, action-packed sequences are set in Frankenstein's lab and at the trial of the nanny Justine, and the work fades off into an eerie final haze with the disappearance of the monster.

All these scenes unfold in a way that is at once engaging and slightly foursquare. Grey's harmonic and rhythmic language is a skillfully deployed version of the conventional lexicon of film scoring, with the emphases placed at just the right junctions to conjure up the dramatic action.

As a result, some of the symphony feels like it's waiting for the vocal and theatrical elements to complete its effect. You can tell from the orchestral writing how much more vibrant and intricately rendered the entire work is likely to be.

In the meantime, Grey's command of the orchestra is often striking, with ingenious combinations of instrumental color and a dramatic sense of scale that shows off those resources expertly. Carneiro and the orchestra, sounding as vivid and forthright as I've heard them in a long while, gave the piece an engrossing performance.

The second half was devoted to a splendid and often moving account of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, with **Simone Porter** as the formidable soloist. At 19, this violinist boasts an impressive technique, steely temperament and a warm, ripe string tone that brought full-throated eloquence to the first movement especially.

Throughout the opening movement, Porter shaped the concerto's expansive melodies with both urgency and grace. The finale, by comparison, sounded a little brusque, in a way that gave evidence of the performer's youth. Still, there's no doubt that Porter is a virtuoso of remarkable talent.

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