

Looking to Bali for inspiration

SOME hybrids — like mules or square tomatoes — are sterile; the experiment can't be repeated without going back to the source. Others, like mongrels, procreate with such profusion that the original union is soon forgotten.

Montreal-born composer Colin McPhee probably died thinking that his attempt to pollinate the Western symphony orchestra with the gamelan music of Bali was an isolated act that bore no fruit. (David Austin's history of 20th-century music written in the mid 1960s dismisses McPhee, who died in 1964, as having had but slight significance). But McPhee inspired others to look to Indonesia, and subsequent, tougher and extremely prolific hybrids — the pattern music associated with Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and a host of other composers, for example — owe a huge debt to McPhee's original infatuation. This later style has, in fact, become so ubiquitous that the connection to gamelan music is all but obliterated for the average listener. But it took only a few bars of McPhee's *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, one of three McPhee works given fine performances by the Esprit Orchestra at the Jane Mallett Theatre on Sunday night, to reinstate that three-way connection incontrovertibly. Had McPhee lived another 20 years, he might have been a cult figure.

Tabuh-Tabuhan (1936) is almost a transcription of gamelan music for orchestra. The gamelan references in the two later works on the program, *Concerto for Wind Instruments* (1960) and *Transitions* (1954) are less explicit but still pervasive. Performances of all three works must come to terms with the tension between the

CLASSICAL REVIEW

ESPRIT ORCHESTRA
conducted by Alex Pauk

Reviewed by Elissa Poole

still-romantic ethos of the symphony writing and the abstract sonic world inspired by the gamelan.

It's not how clear how much expressivity McPhee would have wanted in the playing, but Pauk took a middle ground. He allowed the cellists for instance, to shape a recurring pattern in *Tabuh-Tabuhan* dynamically — to warm it up, as it were — and pianist Andrew Burashko inflected his solos both rhythmically and dynamically.

This was often confusing, and I often found myself wanting more emotional distance, more transparent textures and more purity. Sometimes the music lumbered with intent, when it might have shimmered with suggestion, but to a certain extent the dilemma is written into McPhee's music. He lived too early for the option of postmodern detachment to offer him an obvious way out.

Sandwiched in between the McPhee was Bob Becker's *Music on the Moon* — fortuitously coinciding with a full moon outside — whose cross-cultural inspiration was North Indian classical music. In it, Becker scatters the pitches of a raga associated with the full moon like stars in a night sky, constructing a relatively tranquil harmonic atmosphere that is then swept with nervous energy, like a moon on a gusty night passing continuously in and out of sight among the clouds

At Jane Mallet Theatre Sunday

JoAnn Falletta spins a celebration of life in "Carmina Burana"

BY PAUL SAYEGH

SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

NORFOLK — Friday night's Virginia Symphony concert provided further proof of the high artistic level at which this ensemble is operating.

JoAnn Falletta led the orchestra, as well as the Virginia Symphony Chorus and the Virginia Children's Chorus, in a rousing performance of Carl Orff's choral blockbuster "Carmina Burana" at Chrysler Hall.

"Carmina Burana" is a crowd pleaser, a piece that aims to get at an audience in the most direct way possible. It has lots of catchy, repetitive melodies and tremendous energy in its rhythms. Its climaxes could be right out of a Hollywood spectacular.

Although its composer wrote other music, he is remembered chiefly by this piece, a setting of 13th century texts celebrating life, love, drinking and sex.

The Virginia Symphony Chorus was outstanding, singing with full tone and good balance between its sections.

It can't be easy to get a large body of singers to move along precisely at some of the quick tempos Falletta chose, but the chorus managed. There were moments when coordination among orchestra, choir and soloists was poor, but these were few. The Virginia Children's Chorus brought accuracy and a light, fresh sound to its important part.

Of the soloists, baritone Douglas Webster was most effective, either as a drunken abbot or as a lover pleading with his girl. Webster's voice was full and rich in its upper register, where much of his music is placed. Lower, he was at times covered by the orchestra.

Tenor Caroll Freeman gave a humorous performance of the Roasted Swan song, in which he sings a bird's lament that he is being cooked for dinner. Freeman's singing of this high, exposed part was outstanding.

Carolann Page, the evening's soprano, had trouble coping with the

CONCERT REVIEW

The Virginia Symphony, conducted by JoAnn Falletta, Friday at Chrysler Hall.

ters were often clouded by a wide vibrato. This compromised her ability to sound like a young girl in love.

Falletta brought out many interesting details in the orchestral part, keeping everything in balance, and building to a climax that had the audience cheering.

Earlier in the program, the orchestra performed the U.S. premiere of Bob Becker's *Music on the Moon*.

The composer was on hand to comment on the piece before it was played. He spoke of his long-time interest in Indian music and how he had incorporated a favorite Indian scale into his work.

What was striking, though, was how these Eastern elements were absorbed into a Western

frame. One could hear the influence of Debussy, Berg, and even Bernard Herrmann, composer of the music for "Psycho" and "Vertigo."

Becker's orchestration yielded several colorful and striking moments, and the lunar ambiance was well-caught. The overall shape of the work was less easy to decipher on first hearing.

Also on the program was Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*, his tone poem about two lovers encountered by Dante in the "Inferno." Falletta and the orchestra were successful in the brooding opening section of the work, as well as in the more animated parts describing the winds of Hell.

The love music, especially the beautiful clarinet solo by Patti Carlson, was sensitively played. Here, though, Falletta tended to linger too much, so that the piece began to drag.

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