



May 9, 2014

## Pacific Symphony concert featuring film composers produces two hits, two flops

BY TIMOTHY MANGAN

### AMERICAN COMPOSERS FESTIVAL

**With:** Pacific Symphony; Carl St. Clair, conductor; Sophie Shao, cello

**Where:** Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, Costa Mesa

**When:** May 8

**Next:** 8 p.m. May 9-10

**How much:** \$25-\$185

**Call:** 714-755-5799

**Online:** [pacificsymphony.org](http://pacificsymphony.org)

The Pacific Symphony's annual American Composers Festival has always been something to mark on the calendar. The 14th iteration of the event is upon us – it began Thursday night in Segerstrom Concert Hall – and it turned out to be the usual pleasure and stimulation. The program included no proven masterpieces for a change, instead offering the listener four works by living composers that we were asked, implicitly at least, to consider as worthy or not. Exercise for the ears.

The composers were film composers – all from Hollywood, with 11 Oscars between them – but the music wasn't film music. The four pieces were written for the concert stage (more or less), meant to be performed without the benefit of cinematic support or, more importantly, inspiration. That's a special challenge for a film composer to face, and each of them here answered it in his own way, successfully and not. The failures had their own kind of interest, though, and helped show why the other pieces worked.

Music written for concert performance has its own imperatives. It must, somehow, work on its own or die on the stage. A concert piece must create its own drama or narrative or interest and can only answer to itself. It's apparently not as easy as it might look.

Howard Shore ("The Lord of the Rings") demonstrated, inadvertently, how not to write a concerto. The absence of certain musical values in his piece underscored their necessity, at least in a concerto. His "Mythic Gardens," for solo cello and orchestra, written for Sophie Shao, who played it here, was wan and meandering. It lacked any significant or dramatic interaction between soloist and group. It lacked dynamic contrast – the orchestra played mezzo-piano virtually the whole time, Shao sawed away on endless melody and busywork. It lacked direction and purpose. Shao did her best but could make nothing of it, conductor Carl St. Clair and the orchestra ditto.

On the other hand, Elliot Goldenthal's Symphony in G-sharp Minor, composed especially for the occasion and given its world premiere at the end of the concert, is a distinguished and exciting piece of work. It knows it's a symphony from the get-go, knows what it has to do. Goldenthal ("Interview with a Vampire," "Frida"), who wrote an opera that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, understands what makes a symphony tick, and that is a consistent development of materials, or, musical progress.

Given a time limitation of 22 minutes, Goldenthal has divided his work into two movements, the first longer, slow, spare and expansive, the second fast, gritty and compact. They play off of each other. The thematic material is simple and limited in scope, all the better to manipulate, vary and mull.

The work is harmonically centered on G-sharp minor but is freely dissonant. Its Moderato con moto has a Mahlerian quality, dark and brooding and serious, also trenchantly orchestrated. It takes its time, is in no rush to show off, is even hesitant in its unwinding. The finale takes the lid off, is brash and jagged and motoric, near the end unleashing a battery of antiphonal percussionists, who slammed away here in the reverberation chambers around the hall, to thrilling stereophonic effect.

Call it dramatic but never cheap. This tightly knit score deserves wide play, and I hope St.Clair and the orchestra will bring it back, too. Hat's off to Goldenthal, who wrote the symphony in his spare time, for no fee.

As prelude to the Goldenthal, the musicians performed "Flight" by James Horner ("Titanic," "Avatar"), which was written to accompany a live aerobic show (which we saw some of in a film short that screened before it). The piece is basically movie music through and through, a completely predictable and soaring main title theme, scored in the usual glamorous way, with upward swooshes between phrases. There's about 90 seconds of music here, stretched to 14 minutes. It might be good with planes flying over.

The concert opened with John Williams' "Tributes! For Seiji," an occasional piece written for the 25th anniversary of conductor Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony. The long, angular main theme is atonal, or at least highly chromatic. Williams unfurls it in urgent, headlong swoops, and along the way delves expertly into orchestral potentialities, exploring various combos and edgy brilliances. It works.

St.Clair handled his introductory duties succinctly, interviewing Shao and Goldenthal. The orchestra managed proficient performances, plush and thriving, of everything thrown its way (except the Shore, as said). In the end, the success rate was 50 percent, better than a baseball average, and better than most new music concerts.

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