

Salonen and company triumph in a far-reaching MusicNOW program

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BY BRYANT MANNING

A funny thing can happen if you take a classical newbie to a MusicNOW concert. Now in its 10th year, the new music series challenges most preconceptions by having (living!) composers present their works to an audience and then even mingle with listeners afterward. A sense of worship is replaced with the spirit of camaraderie. **Add in the sleek contemporary space of the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, and classical music gets a complete image makeover.**

On Monday night, there was much to gain from witnessing first-hand newer works by composers Esa-Pekka Salonen, Oliver Knussen and Rolf Wallin. CSO Mead composer-in-residence Mark-Anthony Turnage hosted a far-reaching program that included fragments of a David Lynch-like horror (by Wallin) and a contemporary take on Stravinsky's "A Soldier's Tale" (by Salonen).

Wallin's "LautLeben" (1999) was conceptually the evening's most unique creation. This daring electronic multimedia work comes from the school of Stockhausen, but takes enough risks to make its headmaster seem like Shirley Temple. Jazz soprano Sidsel Endresen, like Wallin a Norwegian (and who collaborated with him on the work), soloed in a way that Wallin described as if "her voice was traveling inside herself." Technology contorted her vocals around electronic tapes playing spastic throat calls and vertiginous squeals. An enormous screen behind the soprano projected glowing images that radiated delicately in the pitch-black theater.

So spacey was the work that Endresen had to inform the audience it was over, but she captivated nonetheless.

Back on earth, Knussen's short chamber symphony, "Songs Without Voices" (1992), scored for eight instrumentalists, revealed a more conventional work. Amy Dissanayake's liquid pianism and near perfect touch went a long way with CSO cellist Jonathan Pegis' effortless vibrato. Thorny harmonies crept in and out, but this was a seductive romance at its core.

Salonen, the veteran music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, had just come off a busy weekend guest-conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in Mozart's Mass and Knussen's Violin Concerto. When he moves on from the L.A. Philharmonic in 2009, he plans to devote more time to composing.

Salonen's "Catch and Release" (2006) is a rapidly changing, small-scale gem which provided poignant solos from CSO violinist Nancy Park and trombonist Charles Vernon. The maturity apparent in the last movement's brisk and bracing rhythms attested to a composer first, conductor second.

Bryant Manning is a locally based free-lance writer.

