

Contemporary Youth Orchestra: Joan Tower celebration (Mar. 9)

by Daniel Hathaway



Liza Grossman’s Contemporary Youth Orchestra seized the opportunity of Joan Tower’s 80th birthday to invite the composer to Cleveland for a mini-residency followed by a March 9 concert at Tri-C’s Metro Auditorium entirely devoted to her music.

The evening began with a short video detailing some of Tower’s interactions with the young players during the previous several days, then Grossman invited the composer to the podium to talk about her music. Tower’s laid-back, self-effacing comments immediately endeared her to the audience — much as she had obviously won over the players during the rehearsal process.

The program began with the Ohio premiere of her *Sixth Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, commissioned by Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony for its 100th anniversary season — her previous fanfares were written for the Houston Symphony, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, Carnegie Hall, the Kansas City Symphony, and the Aspen Music Festival. Most are for brass like the Copland work that gave the series its title, but the Kansas City and Baltimore pieces are for full orchestra. They still qualify as fanfares by virtue of their celebratory, propulsive rhythms, and CYO gave No. 6 a rousing rendition to open the concert.

Stroke depicts the “extreme emotions” Tower experienced when her brother suffered a debilitating cerebrovascular accident in 2008. Its anxious textures, punctuated by flashing lights and loud orchestral chords, were relieved by moments of calm featuring expressive instrumental solos.

In the same serious vein, Tower's string orchestra piece *In Memory* began as a memorial to one of the composer's friends, but she later expanded its theme of death and loss to include the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Elegiac like Barber's *Adagio* but more animated and dissonant, it received a sensitive, expressive performance by CYO's string players.



Tower's *Tambor* grew out of her formative years in South America, when she experienced a lot of percussion-rich Latin music. CYO has performed it in 2001 and 2009, but given the complete turnover in personnel that the orchestra experiences over only a few years, *Tambor* must have been new this time around to everyone but the conductor.

The five soloists — timpanist and four percussion players — revelled in their prominent roles, underscoring timbres and acting as counterpoint to orchestral events, as well as being spotlighted in solo cadenzas from time to time.

Joan Tower's richly colored, rhythmically spiced music is a natural vehicle for young orchestral players, who delivered handsome performances on Saturday evening.

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