

# Review

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## SYMPHONY REVIEW

### A Concerto Challenging The Concerto

Feb. 13, 00



Robert  
Greenberg

By Benjamin Frandzel

The San Francisco Conservatory of Music's Orchestra met the challenges of a demanding and creative program last Sunday, shedding some light on a couple of standard works, offering the world premiere of Robert Greenberg's Piano Concerto No.2., and properly revealing Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* as a work that balances classicism and adventure. And in a very different way, Greenberg's worthy work was an interaction of a very personal creative voice with the history of the concerto.

Greenberg's work in three movements is dedicated to the wonderful pianist Mack McCray and expertly designed to bring out his many strengths. McCray's incisive rhythmic sense and clarity of voice leading were brought to bear in the rapid, toccata-like textures of the first and third movements. He also approached the music with a fine sense of balance between lyricism and ferocity, and between immediate dramatic effects and a long-range sense of shape and architecture.

The first movement, *Throb*, was an exploration of the traditional, pre-modern role of percussion in the orchestra, i.e. as a source of accent and added color. The difference in this case was Greenberg's imaginative expansion of that role to the soloist and the entire orchestra. Opening with mallet percussion coupled with pizzicato strings, then introducing the pianist, a long series of rapid, emphatic figures were traded between the soloist and the sequentially activated sections of the orchestra. This vigorous exploration of accent as the music's primary aspect was succeeded by a shorter lyrical section. Sustained strings supported a far sweeter piano and a brief solo flute melody, before picking up to echo the work's beginning.

*Lyres and Smokers*, the second movement, typified the work in that it simultaneously explored and

challenged the history of the concerto. In a nod to tradition, Greenberg concluded the movement with a solo cadenza, but in beginning with one as well, added an unusual stroke. This opening section was a highlight of the work, as McCray sculpted its lengthening, increasingly dissonant lines with great sensitivity. In between these framing solo passages, the muted strings followed a calmer but similar process, beginning with a ghostly stillness, growing into longer lines, before the entrance of the winds and the subdued piano. Greenberg's gradual blending of moods was an effective source of development, as the piano's concluding solo was far more delicate than its jagged opening had been.

The Concerto finished with tremendous energy, again touching on the idea of collective percussiveness, as the sound of the striking of brake drums were paired with upper register piano tremolos for much of the final movement. Fanfare-style brass answered this approach, most prominently in the midst of rapidly-shifting orchestral colors, leading to a massed conclusion. Despite the prominence and virtuosity of the piano writing, this work is a distinct variant on the concerto idea, or perhaps a distant relative of the baroque concerto. While it sometimes engages in a dialogue with the orchestra, the piano is paired so skillfully with instrumental groups for unusual colors, or is swept away by them in some cases, that it occasionally acts more as the most prominent member of an imaginatively scored ensemble.

Between the outstanding work of Greenberg and McCray, the Concerto served as a bit of a showcase for the Conservatory's faculty, but also spotlighted several excellent student performers. Notable were the trio of percussionists, who brought brilliance and energy to the third movement's demanding music. Praise is also due to guest conductor Delta David Gier, currently a New York Philharmonic assistant conductor, who precisely brought out the work's animating rhythms and challenging coloristic balances while giving McCray plenty of breathing room.

Alisdair Neale took the podium in the concert's second half for a very fine performance of the *Symphonie Fantastique*. Neale responded well to the classical origins of the work, bringing out its broadest gestures but not smothering its rich details in a late-romantic glaze. The *March to the Scaffold* was a movement of stirring intensity without bombast. By the time the work's final tutti chords were filling the hall, they made great impact, thanks to the orchestra's restraint in the earlier movements. The

Conservatory Orchestra's woodwind soloists played quite beautifully in the *Symphonie's* many exposed moments, and the brass were powerful without unnecessary excess.

The music of Berlioz also opened the concert in the form of the *Roman Carnival* overture. Graduate conductor Sanford Dole, active for a long-time with several Bay Area vocal ensembles, offered a fine introduction to the composer's language by highlighting its color and drama. He especially brought out the operatic character of the work's long, crescendo lines, and made the most of the sudden bursts of color within the overture's carefully balanced design.

(Benjamin Frandzel is a Bay Area musician and writer. In addition to writing concert music, he has collaborated with dance, theater, and visual artists, and has written about music for many publications and musical organizations. He is currently a graduate student in composition at San Francisco State University.)

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A project of the San Francisco Foundation Community Initiative Funds

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