

Crossing Borders With Allure

American Composers Orchestra Presents ‘Border
Vanguards’

By STEVE SMITH APRIL 7, 2014

Making new music approachable without pandering has long been of keen interest to the American Composers Orchestra, especially in the eight years that Derek Bermel has been involved — first as a composer in residence, and now as its artistic director. “Border Vanguards,” presented at Zankel Hall on Friday night, showed how this ensemble has become unusually adept at assembling menus of complementary courses, mixing the savory with the sweet in a manner palatable to almost anyone.

The program, conducted by the music director George Manahan, suited its title in multiple ways, connoting not only the borders among neighboring nations, but also among musical styles. The bill featured pieces by three composers of Latin American heritage: Silvestre Revueltas, active in Mexico until his death in 1940; Marcos Balter, born in Brazil, long based in Chicago and soon to join the faculty at Montclair State University in New Jersey; and Gabriela Lena Frank, the California-born daughter of Lithuanian Jewish and Peruvian-Chinese parents.

Photo



Played in succession in the concert's first half, works by those composers proved that "Latin American" is useless as an indication of style. Revueltas's 1932 piece "Alcancías" — multiple translations include "piggy banks" and "expansive bullets" — begins with a strident, jolting evocation of carnivalesque clamor, followed with a sultry nocturne and a buoyant folk dance.

Mr. Balter's "Favela," heard in its premiere, is more elegant and cerebral, yet no less evocative. Meant to suggest makeshift Brazilian shantytowns and the disparate individual stories contained therein, the piece offers a dreamlike progression of erratic bumps and scrapes, loosely fastened with repeated gently rising glissandos in a manner at times reminiscent of Varèse. "Manchay Tiempo" ("Time of Fear"), a tunefully suspenseful piece ripe with intimations of peril, showed Ms. Frank's knack for creating lush sounds with limited instrumentation.

The two pieces in the concert's second half left geography behind and traipsed across stylistic boundaries. Gunther Schuller's "Contours" (1955-58) is an early example of what came to be called Third Stream music, a fusion of classical modernism with elements of jazz. Atonal, dreamy and fitful, the piece is tautly constructed and gorgeously voiced, with unmistakable bluesy harmonies and swing rhythms subtly deployed in its central Partita section.

In "Mar de Setembro" ("September Sea"), which closed the concert, Mr. Bermel sets five poems by the Portuguese poet Eugénio de Andrade to unambiguously luscious music. A versatile, respectful chameleon, Mr. Bermel weds Impressionism, bossa nova, tango, waltz and more to evocative ends, and expertly deploys two singular instruments: the aquaphone, a water-filled metal pot that whines eerily when its spokes are bowed, and the jazz singer Luciana Souza's nuanced, wine-rich voice.

As ever with this ensemble, occasional patches of rhythmic imprecision showed just how hard it is for a freelance orchestra to assert absolute command of its disparate, challenging works. But under Mr. Manahan's detailed, charismatic supervision, everything cohered well enough to make the point and please the palate.