

Music review: Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra premieres Derek Bermel's 'Mar de Setembro' with Luciana Souza

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The Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra has not been without its troubles. Music director Jeffrey Kahane missed the end of last season and much of this season recovering from mononucleosis. But he's been back since March and is seemingly in fine fettle.

Certainly, the last concert of his 14th season with the orchestra Sunday at UCLA's Royce Hall was an upbeat event. Kahane served as lively and engaged pianist and conductor in Mendelssohn's Concerto for Violin and Piano and led a blazing account of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony. And there were surprising helpings of the kind of good news unusual from performing arts organizations during an economic downturn.

In addressing the audience, the orchestra's board president didn't ask for support but said the orchestra is doing well financially and praised the nearly full house for that. LACO traditionally ends its season with a new work commissioned by the orchestra's donors, who then follow the progress through talks with the composer and rehearsals. Kahane prefaced Derek Bermel's "Mar de Setembro" (September Sea) -- this year's Sound Investment premiere -- by noting that a decade ago only a handful signed up for the commissioning experiment. This year, Bermel had nearly 60 commissioners to thank.

But maybe the best bit of good news is that Kahane's contract has been extended to 2013 and his absence has seemingly hurt neither the organizational spirit nor ensemble. That was apparent from the

beginning of Mendelssohn's double concerto, with Kahane conducting from the keyboard and concertmaster Margaret Batjer as violin soloist.

The concerto needs special pleading. It's an unusual work. There are no major concertos for violin and piano in the literature -- including this one, which was written when Mendelssohn was 14. The composer's voice does begin to be heard, and there are passages of appealing experimentalism, along with lots of Bach and Haydn and Mozart and Weber. But Kahane and Batjer made it work by not dawdling and by distracting the listener with their sparkling virtuosity.

"Mar de Setembro" is a short set of five songs to texts by the late Portuguese poet Eugénio de Andrade and written for the Brazilian jazz singer Luciana Souza. Bermel, who is LACO's composer in residence, has produced a small gem.

The poetic imagery focuses on sweet lips and kisses: the moon's "golden kiss," the September sea's luminous "sky, lips, sand" and the water nightingale's "memory of lips." In the fourth song, "Hidden Waters," lips are "Thirsty still for other lips." From the last song, "Fruit," spill "peaches, pears, oranges, strawberry's cherries, figs, apples, melon and honey dew," which are, for De Andrade, "music of my senses" and "pure pleasures of the tongue."

Bermel takes De Andrade at his word, with dreamy music of the senses and pure pleasures for Souza's tongue. The orchestra laps like waves of the ocean. The Brazilian singer, amplified and unusually laid back (she was said to have been ill on Sunday), handled irresistible melodies with easy flowing grace and unerring musicality.

The first song, "What Moonlit Voice," was sung in the dark, with only an aquaphone (water-filled and mellow) as accompaniment. In the third song, "Song," Souza's chesty, wine-red lower register was nudged by a tickling xylophone expanding on exuberant bird song. "Fruit" hints at tango and fado. A violin cadenza tumbles from high to low, and then to the tempo of a distant waltz, Souza sang in low and swaying melody, "oh, tangerines, oh, tangerines," that you could all but taste.

Mozart's "Prague," after intermission, was fast, intricate and dramatic. Kahane conducted it as a symphony of surprises. The best performances of Mozart's are those in which you never really know what will come next or why, since Mozart liked nothing better to set one thing up and then go somewhere else with beguiling ease.

Kahane's phrases in this, the 38th of Mozart's 41 symphonies, were often initiated by sweeping motions. He maintained order, but he nevertheless did his sweeping to stir up dust not remove it. Details, maybe not noticed before by a listener -- an inner oboe line, say -- suddenly flew by, now noticed but too fleet to fully apprehend.

It was a terrific performance. Kahane is very much back.