

Critic's Notebook NY Phil Biennial laudable, yet in need of curatorial vision



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Members of Bridge to Nowhere perform for the NY Phil Biennial. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

NEW YORK — A biennial, as practiced by the art world, is a devotion, a talking stock every other year. It is also pure catnip for a culture maven hooked on being up-to-date.

The New York Philharmonic is now the first major orchestra to emulate the Whitney Museum with a big institutional bi-yearly survey of the now. It began last week with two disappointingly insignificant operas but then exploded over the weekend with a bevy of intriguingly diverse concerts. By the time it concludes Saturday, the NY Phil Biennial will have gotten around to a Whitney-sized offering of nearly 80 works by 74 composers in venues around Manhattan.

At least part of the inspiration for the NY Phil Biennial has surely been the Los Angeles Philharmonic's high-profile new music festivals that have been changing the orchestral landscape throughout the country. But achieving a Biennial buzz in the Big Apple is a unique challenge, as was evident from the eight Biennial concerts I attended last weekend.

The Biennial is clearly a good idea for a great orchestra required to contend with the weekly parade through town of the world's other great orchestras. New music is also omnipresent in all five boroughs. It is a rare evening when there isn't something current to be heard in Brooklyn alone.

The NY Phil Biennial approach, however, seems less about making sense of a contentiously noisy environment than merely adding to it. There is no curatorial vision. No catalog with grandly conceived, fascinatingly provocative essays, but rather a collection of concerts, several handed over to other ensembles. There weren't even T-shirts.

Curiously the NY Phil turned the festival opening over to Gotham Chamber Opera, which offered Toshio Hosokawa's recent 45-minute monodrama, "The Raven," for mezzo-soprano and 12 players. What is fascinating about this score is the Japanese composer's unidiomatic setting of Poe's text, creating mystery through ethereally haunted sounds and strange accent of the poetic lines. The soloist Fredrika Brillembourg, however, went in for a more conventional operatic style. In Luca Veggetti's production she was mirrored by dancer Alessandra Ferri, doubling up on emotional overstatement. Neal Goren's conducting was not subtle.

The other opera, H.K. Gruber's "Gloria — A Pig Tale," was a collaboration by the N.Y. Phil and the Juilliard School and presented at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Alan Gilbert conducted and his frequent collaborator, Doug Fitch, was responsible for the production. It's a little hard to figure out what Gruber, an Austrian left-wing fabulist, was up to, but there was little question that the tale of a pretty pig who falls for her butcher had underlying political nastiness.

We got instead a family-friendly show with cutesy costumes and Broadway-style acting. The kids in the audience on a Sunday afternoon with glorious weather outdoors acted the restless prisoners they were. A biennial is no place for watering-down political art. Kids, at least, were far better treated in concerts featuring very young composers and an ensemble of high school students from programs that the New York Philharmonic admirably supports.

The N.Y. Phil watered down nothing when in its Avery Fisher home at Lincoln Center, and had a triumph, a real Biennial-style tribute with the New York premiere on Saturday of Julia Wolfe's "Anthracite Fields." An hour-long postmodern oratorio about the plight of coal workers a century ago, it featured the Bang on a Can All-Stars and Choir of Trinity Wall Street, conducted by Julian Wachner, and an eloquent video backdrop by Jeff Sugg.

Here Wolfe, one of the founders of Bang on a Can, captures not only the sadness of hard lives lost (it begins with a long recitation of names of men named John who had mining accidents between 1896 and 1916 in Pennsylvania's anthracite fields) but also of the sweetness and passion of a way of daily life now also lost. The music compels without overstatement. This is a major, profound work.

A late-night concert Saturday in the Museum of Modern Art lobby was part of its "Contact!" series of new music concerts that Gilbert began on the L.A. Phil Green Umbrella model. Here the players were positioned before the windows facing a sculpture garden but looking out at darkness for a long program, which went past midnight and was conducted by Matthias Pintscher, who originally conceived it for the Salzburg Festival.

Nine composers were commissioned to write pieces inspired by sculpture around the Austrian town. Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth's take on Mario Merz's "Number in the Forest" stood out for its edgy obsessiveness. Jay Schwarz's "M," based on a Mozart homage by Markus Lupertz, was a reminder of the weird, unclassifiable work of the American expat from San Diego rarely heard in this country.

Two Biennial programs turned over to the Orchestra of St. Luke's, conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado, considered the music and influence of Pierre Boulez and British composer George Benjamin. The performances were first-rate. The music was excellent but not groundbreaking. The one surprise was Heinz Holliger's "Ostinato "Funèbre," an eerie ostinato that used a water gong and the sound of tearing paper.

Both turn out to be John Cage inventions, a composer and the founder of the New York School, which the New York Philharmonic has gone out of its way to either ignore or subvert throughout its history. This may be an avenue for future biennials, especially if the orchestra hopes to keep up with museums.

MoMA, in fact, has just acquired Cage's original score for his silent piece, "4'33"," and the museum has built an exhibition around the revolutionary score, which opened the L.A. Phil season in September.

In a radio interview, Gilbert called the Biennial "an adventure without really knowing what is going to happen." The concerts I heard steered clear of unknowns. But the Biennial remains a good idea. The New York Philharmonic has invested impressive resources into it. And next time around, it may well know better wherein lies the buzz.

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