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## 'Seamstress' a bit threadbare in CSO premiere

By John von Rhein



As if to try to atone for the shocking dearth of world premieres next season, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is closing its current subscription series over the next four weeks with the first performances of two CSO-commissioned works, both by its resident composers.

That said, the premiere of Anna Clyne's new piece, "The Seamstress," which marked the return of Ludovic Morlot for a two-week podium residency Thursday night at Symphony Center, turned out to be less of an event than one had expected, given all the musical talent that was involved.

"The Seamstress" (2015) is the culmination of a series of violin works that have occupied Clyne over the last six years. One of those works, her double-violin concerto "Prince of Clouds," was heard at CSO subscription concerts here in 2012, with Jennifer Koh – for whom Clyne wrote the solo violin part in "The Seamstress" – as one of the soloists, along with Koh's former violin teacher, Jaime Laredo.

Several sources fed Clyne's inspiration. The title, and lines affixed to the work's five sections in the printed score, come from a William Butler Yeats poem about "a coat covered with embroideries out of old mythologies." Electronically processed recordings of Irish-born composer Irene Buckley reading Yeats' verse are threaded through the transparent textures, suggesting ghostly memories of Clyne's Irish grandmother and aunt.

The composer acquired techniques used in the quasi-concerto while taking violin and Irish fiddle classes at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. While writing the piece, she tried out those techniques on an old violin that she had found in a thrift shop in her native England.

Clyne often collaborates with choreographers, and, indeed, she conceived "The Seamstress" as an imaginary ballet in which dreamlike images ranging from love to despair emerge from the unraveling threads of an embroidered cloth resting on the lap of a solitary seamstress.

Perhaps when a dance element is added, the 25-minute, single-movement work will carry greater impact than it did Thursday. Much of the musical content flows out of a simple melody for solo violin that has the wistful flavor of an Irish folk tune. As the tune threaded through Clyne's delicate orchestral fabric, echoes of Howard Shore's Celtic-tinged evocation of "the Shire" in his score to the "Lord of the Rings" film trilogy kept coming to mind, though I'm sure no borrowing was involved on Clyne's part.

Despite the meticulous sense of craft that is the composer's hallmark, and despite the extraordinary poise, assurance and sensitivity Koh brought to the continuously unfolding solo part, the musical content ultimately proved too thin to sustain interest on its own. As for the electronic embroidery, the mostly unintelligible speech and piercing yawps of synthesized sound (like bursts of feedback) added little but aural irritation to the work and could easily have been dispensed with.

The composer took a quick bow alongside Koh and Morlot before the polite applause died away.

At least the 19th century symphonic staples on either side of the premiere added musical ballast to the program.

Morlot secured colorful, finely balanced playing for Berlioz's "Les francs-juges" Overture, the only music that survives from the composer's eponymous opera (he destroyed the rest). Berlioz's solemn pronouncements for trumpets, trombones and tubas could have been written with the formidable CSO brass choir in mind.

Given the sheer familiarity of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica") to modern concert audiences, it's tough for any conductor to make the music live with anything near the boldness and audacity that the work's first listeners in 1805 found in it.

Sometimes the path of choice is to allow a great orchestra to fall back on its collective memory of this hourlong masterpiece and not get in the way too much; that appeared to be Morlot's stratagem. But this can lead to interpretive anonymity and that was the effect of Thursday's performance, well meaning and well played though it was.

The French conductor set generally brisk tempos for each movement, supported by a harmonic foundation considerably lighter than is the CSO's beefier wont.

The fiercely dissonant chordal sequence of the opening movement passed in haste and without emphasis, although Morlot made much of the horn proclamations and dynamic contrasts of the second movement's funeral march. The variations-finale brought a fuller sense of engagement between players and podium than had been evident earlier in this "Eroica."