

A good day for Aaron Jay Kernis at SummerFest

By James Chute

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As Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Aaron Jay Kernis explained from the Sherwood Auditorium stage Friday, he was having a very good month.

His newest piece, “Perpetual Chaconne,” had been premiered at Chamber Music Northwest two weeks earlier. Now it was about to be played at the La Jolla Music Society SummerFest and was scheduled for another performance this week at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival.

But after clarinetist John Bruce Yeh and the Calder Quartet finished with Kernis’ 18-minute piece Friday, you had to believe that Kernis’ month got even better.

In introducing a program that also included recent pieces by Marc-André Dalbavie, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and Gabriel Kahane, SummerFest music director Cho-Liang Lin compared hearing a new piece of music to taking a new ride at an amusement park. Sometimes you want to ride again and sometimes you don’t. With Kernis’ “Perpetual Chaconne,” as with Dalbavie’s equally engaging Quartet for Piano and Strings, you wanted to ride again.

If you’ve heard the Pachelbel “Canon,” with its seemingly endless (in some interpretations, you might say perpetual) variations on a ground bass and a set harmonic pattern, you have some familiarity with the chaconne form, which is a close relation.

In Kernis’ treatment, however, the variations become increasingly unhinged. The melodic lines seem to take on a mind of their own, going off in unexpected ways, forming surprising combinations, until the piece threatens to completely come unglued. At that point, Kernis reels it in just enough to return us to solid ground before the music seems to evaporate into thin air.

The Calder (violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook, violist Jonathan Moerschel and cellist Eric Byers) and Yeh, performing the piece for the first time (the Chamber Music Northwest premiere in Portland

was played by David Shifrin and the Orion Quartet), offered a curious, committed, convincing interpretation.

Where Kernis eases you into his often dissonant sound world, Dalbavie immediately tosses you into the fray between piano and strings. With violinist Yura Lee, violist Paul Neubauer, cellist Felix Fan and pianist Jeremy Denk, the piece ended when it exhausted itself.

On the first half, the Newbury Trio and the Amphion String Quartet collaborated in Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's 2008 Septet for Piano Trio and String Quartet and composer Gabriel Kahane joined the Calder Quartet as vocalist in his 2011 "Come On All You Ghosts." Both well-crafted pieces sounded like rides we had taken before.

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