

Samuel Barber's 'The Lovers' proves a fond farewell

Choral director departs on high note

BY CHRISTIAN HERTZOG

After 44 years, David Chase is stepping down from the podium as choral director of the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus. During that tenure, he brought San Diego performances of important choral music that we otherwise may never have heard. Off the top of my head, I can cite Lutoslawski's "Three Poems of Henri Michaux," Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms," Hindemith's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and a generous portion of Bolcom's "Songs of Innocence and Experience."

In his final program with the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus on Saturday evening at UC San Diego's Mandeville Auditorium, Chase revived a neglected Samuel Barber composition for baritone, chorus and orchestra.

"The Lovers" must have seemed a mawkish anachronism in 1971. Simplicity and directness in music then was distasteful unless radically stripped down to the monomaniacal focus of Philip Glass or Steve Reich.

However, the last three decades have seen a plethora of bland, insipid American compositions in wishy-washy tonal idioms infect our concert halls. Against them, the inspired melodies, compelling rhythms, convincing harmonic language and clear musical textures of "The Lovers" demonstrate Barber's singular genius.

Barber was frequently described as "neo-Romantic," yet that label implies a return to Romanticism. He grew up and matured as the last generation of late Romantic composers — Puccini, Rachmaninoff, Strauss — were still active. His own music was a continuation and refinement of that aesthetic, enhanced by dissonances or rhythms his predecessors would not have used.

Musical tastes changed while Barber remained steadfast. In 1971, that seemed a liability, obliviousness to progress, yet from the 21st century, Barber's persistence to his own musical vision seems courageous. Few have declared "The Lovers" a masterpiece, yet hearing Saturday's performance, it was apparent that this is a major choral work that has been unjustly neglected.

Barber selected poems by Pablo Neruda in English translations by Christopher Logue and W.S. Merwin, and they are strikingly erotic — at least for classical music, where the symphony hall remains the last bastion of Puritanism in the arts. Over the course of nine movements, Barber depicts intoxicating lust that eventually disintegrates, a sad remembrance of lost passion.

Beneath the expressive emotions of "The Lovers" lies the solid construction of a master craftsman, tied together by two musical motives heard in an instrumental prelude.

Baritone Gregorio González — a former member of the LJS&C — cleanly sang Neruda's texts with throbbing passion and heartbreaking regret. His upper range was bright, projecting more readily than his lower.

The men in the chorus disappointed with weak, uneven entrances and unsure intonation, in contrast to the solid ensemble work of the sopranos and altos. The orchestra responded readily to Chase's direction.

The concert opened with a joyful account of Berlioz's "Overture to Beatrice and Benedict."

Arnold Schoenberg wrote "Transfigured Night" for a string sextet. His 1943 arrangement for string orchestra requires an agility that was beyond the technique of the La Jolla Symphony.

For a programmed encore, Chase led the unaccompanied chorus in "Mary Hynes" and "The Coolin," two beautiful movements from Barber's "Reincarnations." Here the basses and tenors matched the women's voices in strength and ensemble work.

It was a lovely conclusion to an evening and a career that championed important 20th-century choral music. The audience showed their gratitude with two curtain calls for David Chase.

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