

Turanga-Lite

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Olivier Messiaen's 10-movement *Turangalîla-Symphonie* is rarely performed because of its length (about an hour and a quarter) and its unusual instrumentation (the score calls for ondes martenot, vibraphone, and glockenspiel, among many other instruments). The double whammy makes performances of this 20th-century masterpiece hard to find — and fund. For the second half of its Saturday concert, the Santa Rosa Symphony tried to solve the *Turangalîla* problem by performing only three movements without skimping on the instrumentation.

In place of the other seven movements, they offered UCLA musicologist Robert Winter, who tried to explain what *Turangalîla* was all about to the presumably bewildered suburban audience.



Cecile Licad

Although Winter's comments were occasionally insightful, they couldn't atone for the basic fact that every minute of Winter was one less minute of Messiaen. At about 20 minutes, his introduction lasted nearly as long as the three-movement *Turangalîla* excerpt (pegged at 22 minutes in the program notes). With all due respect, Winter should have introduced the piece during an optional preconcert talk so the orchestra could have performed the entire work during the concert proper. Who cares about time (or words) when you're listening to music as transcendent as Messiaen's?

One reason for the *Turangalîla-lite* offering was the concert's format, which hewed to the traditional short work and concerto in the first half, followed by a symphony in the second. In this case, the short work was Wagner's "Nachtgesang" from *Tristan und Isolde* (another excerpt), and the concerto was Ravel's G major for piano, performed splendidly by Cecile Licad.

Both these works were wonderful in themselves, but they became even more significant during the subsequent *Turangalila* excerpt: the Wagner because it recounts the same love story as the Messiaen; the Ravel because it employs many of the same compositional techniques.

Under the watchful baton of Maestro Bruno Ferrandis, the cellos began the “Nachtgesang” sotto voce, barely rising above a whisper. The pace was luxuriously slow, and the stress of a long, hot day in Sonoma County seemed to flow out of the audience as Wagner’s “night of love” settled on them. The ensuing trumpet and trombone solos were crisply played, and the rest of the orchestra responded with long, flowing lines that sustained the amorous mood, however briefly.

Ferocious Playing

The Ravel, which begins with the snap of a whip, marked an abrupt shift. Licad leaped into her treacherous lines with tremendous drive and energy, mouthing the key phrases as she stared at the keys. She generated considerable volume and sculpted her phrases flawlessly, even under the onslaught of Ravel’s continuous tremolos. When the jazz-inspired first movement ended, a sizeable portion of the audience erupted in applause.

The same unconventional enthusiasm greeted her playing of the second movement, which begins with a long, languorous piano solo. When the orchestra did finally enter, it seemed to be playing accompaniment for an entirely different piece. Here was the connection to Messiaen, who often sets various sections of the orchestra on distinct tracks that nonetheless cohere. The luxurious performance was marred only by a world-record attempt at unwrapping a cough drop, a sound that managed to carry across the balcony through much of the movement.

Any possibility of distraction was blown away during the third movement, which begins as a furious cascade of notes and gets ever so much more so by the end. Licad’s unflagging intensity was matched by the orchestra, in particular by a wonderful bassoon solo. Sadly, the standing ovation didn’t produce an encore.

The piano remained on stage for *Turangalila*, but the pianist changed, rematerializing in the form of veteran Bay Area soloist Miles Graber, who shared the limelight with ondes martenot player Mary Chun. Both sat patiently, along with the rest of the orchestra, as Professor Winter expounded on Messiaen, but they kept the blood flowing by playing occasional excerpts at his bidding.



Bruno Ferrandis

Winter's introduction may have been helpful for some in the audience, but it was delivered at such a rapid clip and with such flippancy that enthusiasm soon waned. There seemed to be palpable relief when the music actually began.

The orchestra played movements 3, 4, and 5 of *Turangalîla*, beginning with "Turangalîla 1" (one of three movements whose name is the same as the symphony), continuing with "Chant d'Amour" (Song of love) and concluding with "Joie du Sang des étoiles" (Joy of the blood of the stars).

Ferrandis was completely unflappable, keeping a steady beat and delivering laser-sharp cues despite the music's overwhelming complexity. The rhythmic variety of the opening movement gave way to the ethereal love song of the second, which featured Graber's sparkling piano. Both, however, were overshadowed by the last movement, one of the most powerful works ever written for an orchestra.

From the supercharged beginning in the brass to the robust entrances of all the other sections and soloists, Ferrandis maintained a fever pitch of excitement and rhythmic drive. The orchestra seemed to hurl itself into this ecstatic dance, leaving no doubt about the movement's underlying narrative. It was a rousing performance, beyond words in its intensity. What a pity it had to end so abruptly. Next time, perhaps, the words can be fewer and the music more.