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Sloshing in Symphonic Waters

A New Work by John Luther Adams Debuts at Lincoln Center

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI JULY 27, 2014

The 81 musicians and singers who were about to give the premiere of “Sila: The Breath of the World,” an alluring, mystical new work by the American composer John Luther Adams conceived for performance outdoors in Lincoln Center’s Hearst Plaza, began to take their assigned places early on Friday evening. It was quite a procession.

A roster of 16 string players lined up in a row on the edge of the tree grove facing the Paul Milstein Pool and Terrace, everyone standing except for four cellists who sat on the stone bench that borders the grove. A large group of woodwind and brass players walked up the slope of Illumination Lawn, which gave them an elevated vantage point. Most of the 17 participating percussionists stood near sets of timpani, drums and various instruments that had already been placed around the pool.

Then, in a bold touch, 16 members of the impressive contemporary music choir the Crossing — the women in loose, long black dresses; the men in black shirts and pants — waded right into the pool, their feet protected by black water socks with tough rubber soles, popular with kayakers. During the performance, they sloshed slowly around the shallow pool using black megaphones to help their high, delicate tones carry through the space. This is the kind of thing aspiring singers are not typically prepared for in music schools. But the choristers were palpably involved throughout the work.

Lincoln Center commissioned “Sila” jointly for the Mostly Mozart

Festival and the Out of Doors series. The center's security officers estimated the crowd that attended this free event, the first of two performances, at 2,500. Many people listened from the shaded grove; most, though, either stood or sat right on the terrace surrounding the pool. Everyone was invited to move around during the performance and hear the piece from different acoustical angles.

One goal of the ambitious \$1.2 billion renovation of Lincoln Center, which was completed in 2012, was to make the campus more open and inviting, a place people would want to hang out. With this piece, Mr. Adams has revealed Hearst Plaza to be an exciting performance space.

He developed a strong environmental consciousness from his decades-long residency in Alaska and that sensibility pervades his music. In May, his Pulitzer Prize-winning orchestra work, "Become Ocean," which evokes the heaving undercurrents of the sea, was given a triumphant New York premiere in a concert at Carnegie Hall by the Seattle Symphony. "Sila" is closer in concept to "Inuksuit," another of Mr. Adams's works intended for performance outdoors, which I heard at the Ojai Festival in California in 2012.

Yet, unlike that work, "Sila" is a meticulously orchestrated score, though the way its elements unfold and the length of each gesture will vary with each performance. It can be played by anywhere from 16 to 80 or so performers; it is intended to last 60 to 70 minutes. In a brief interview before Friday's concert, during which Mr. Adams showed me the score, he said, "I'm still trying to learn the piece."

In Inuit tradition, Sila is the spirit that animates all things, the "breath of the world," as the title of this work puts it. Mr. Adams says in a program note that Sila is not just some elusive natural force, but "our awareness of the world around us." It comes "out of the earth and rises to the sky," he explains. So, to capture this process in sound, he constructed the piece in 16 harmonic clouds, as he calls them, grounded on the first 16 harmonics (or overtones) of a low B flat. If this seems very theoretical, the actual sound of "Sila" could not be more organic or, you might say, holistic.

The performers are grouped into five choirs: string, brass, woodwind, percussion and vocal. Mr. Adams said that the music for each choir could be performed independently or even sequentially. This performance hewed to the “straightforward approach,” he said, with the choirs joining together. Yet, each individual gesture is like a long exaltation of breath, and the performers are soloists who play or sing at their own pace.

What mattered on Friday was the way the plaza became a humming, mass of subdued, flowing sounds. Soft rolled timpani and drum riffs provided rumbling aural support, almost never marking the passage of time with pulsing beats. At first, the soft sounds of voices and instruments were hard to distinguish. Was that a high pianissimo soprano tone or a soft harmonic played by a distant trumpet perched on the lawn? But as the music evolved, it gained in body and density, though not exactly volume. Choirs of reedy woodwinds and delicate, sometimes scratchy string sounds permeated the space. At times “Sila” was like music depicting continental drift. Halfway through, melodic fragments seemed to emerge, though these were often just instruments rising up the harmonic series.

Most of the people who attended “Sila” listened raptly, talking very little, and getting into the spirit. This included many babies strapped to a parent and some impressively attentive toddlers. Like some listeners, I walked around a little to hear the piece from different points, though the acoustical sweet spot would have been right in the middle of the pool, standing alongside the singers from the Crossing.

Musicians from many well-known ensembles took part, including Asphalt Orchestra, JACK Quartet, TILT Brass, Eighth Blackbird and more. Doug Perkins was the musical director. Mark DeChiazza was the choreographer; indeed there was a crucial element of placement and, for the singers in the pool, movement involved.

At the end, Mr. Adams appeared near the grove to take a bow and was greeted by the crowd’s prolonged and appreciative applause. I could imagine “Sila” being performed in the plaza every summer. On the other hand, how about more such commissions?

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