

10.26.2008

Symphony makes music in the hear and now

DETAILS

La Jolla Symphony and Chorus' opening concert, "Time"

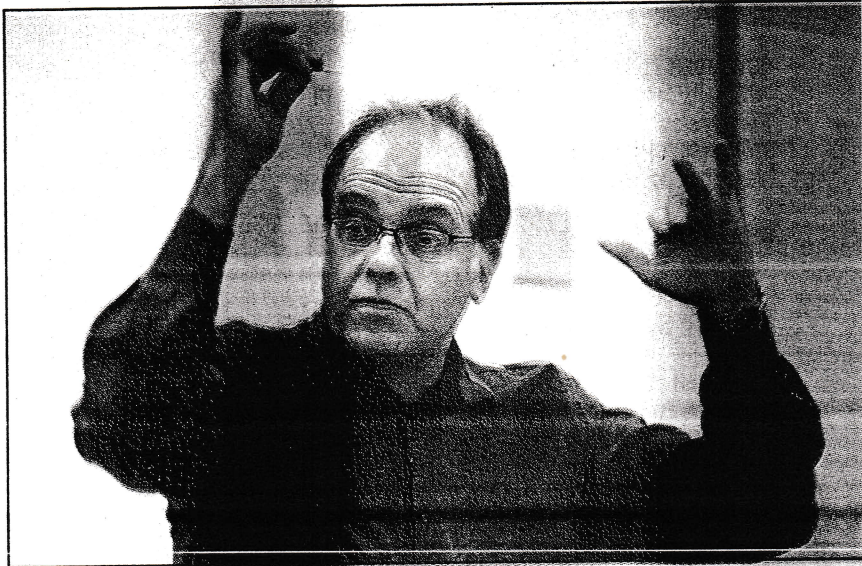
When: Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 3 p.m.

Where: Mandeville Auditorium, UCSD

Tickets: \$15-\$26

Phone: (858) 534-4637

Online: www.lajollasympphony.com



Conductor Steven Schick is taking a revitalized La Jolla Symphony places it has never been before. *Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune*

By Roxana Popescu

On a recent vacation to Costa Rica, thousands of miles from the familiar sounds of his UCSD office, Steven Schick went for a walk, ears open. As rain fell, leaves rustled and choruses of birds sang above.

"I could swear my ears were getting more sensitive to the little sounds, where they were coming from," Schick, music director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus, said in a recent interview. "It was as though the world became visible in an acoustic way."

Nature may be surround sound at its finest, but for Schick, its unrivaled peer is live, and living, music. The La Jolla Symphony and Chorus has been bringing music at its most vibrant to listeners for more than 50 years. This weekend, the symphony opens its

54th season, which is the second year under Schick's direction.

As more orchestras around the U.S. embrace contemporary music — because it's exciting, because it attracts young listeners, because musicians are looking for a change, or because the link in the public's mind between "avant-garde music" and "jarring" is being unhinged by carefully selected programming — the La Jolla Symphony continues to stay one beat ahead. With Schick, the ensemble

has started tackling music so new, in fact, that it sometimes leaves even the musicians' expectations in the dust.

"We've always been a pretty imaginative orchestra. Steve is taking us places we haven't been," said violinist Eric Bromberger, who has been with the ensemble since 1980 and writes

many of the program commentaries. "This kind of programming is, to my imagination at least, entirely new. We're playing a lot of composers that I've never heard of. And I've heard of most of them."

This season's performances are grouped around a common theme: "The DNA of Music." What makes music music? What elements are common to every piece, from Mahler's second symphony to Rick Snow's musical meditation on Darwin?

"What does music do for us? Why do we need it?" asked Schick. Since becoming conductor last year, his aim has been to give each season a sense of cohesiveness that allows the contemporary and classical pieces speak through one another.

"You enliven the old with its proximity to the new, and you anchor the new with its proximity to the old," he explained.

The classics offer one type of gratification — comfort, sensual harmonies and aesthetic truths that have proven themselves over the centuries — but music written now offers a jolt out of complacency.

"We are brain, but we're also skin. We have the need for the sensuousness of art. We need to be diverted. This is not a castigation of those things,"

Schick said. "But this wanting to be calmed, it's the green pill."

And so, with every new piece he chooses, he hopes to show audiences that contemporary music is not a style, but "this huge range of possibilities." A glance at one Internet music store lists 36 subcategories for modern classical music — more than for medieval, baroque, classical and romantic combined.

"Contemporary music talks only about what's happening today. It's not a stylistic term," Schick said.

Innovation, these musicians know, does not come at the cost of beauty or pleasure.

"The standard repertoire is good for our souls, good for

our hearts," Bromberger said. But there's a thrill in untangling a work that's never been played before, and wrapping one's brain and ears around sounds that might never have been heard before. "This orchestra set me free. It taught me to take risks, be open to new music."

For second bassoonist Jim Swift, beauty and innovation coincide in Toru Takemitsu's "From Me Flows What You Call Time," scheduled for

Saturday's opening night.

"It's this Zen-like procession of the percussionists going around the stage, with the musicians performing these exotic rituals, and bells are hanging all over the audience," Swift explained. "The audience goes nuts over it."

Brendi Rawlin, an oboist by night and public relations consultant by day, said friends and clients who have heard her perform tell her their reservations about modern classical music melted away once they listened.

"Some of them like the contemporary more than the classical pieces. I truly, honestly, wasn't expecting that reaction," Rawlin said. "But they say it's cool. It's different."

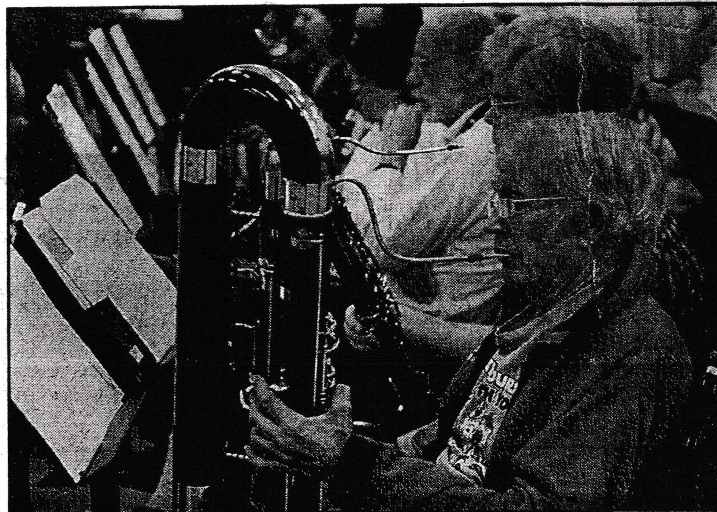
Granted, there are moments in rehearsal when the musicians exchange looks that scream "What the blank is this?" Swift said. Especially the first time they rehearse a piece. That's when Schick steps in as an interpreter and, possibly,

an advocate. This passage will sound completely different when the soloist is here. This is how it will all fit together. Play these four notes slower, because the composer really wants you to sound like you're wondering about what's coming next, he'll explain. It also doesn't hurt that Schick knows many of the composers personally and brings them in to meet with the musicians.

The musicians, all volunteers, are an "unbelievably smart group" of oceanographers, dentists, CPAs and Ph.D.s, Schick said. With such energy and creativity in the room, rehearsals are more of a conversation than a hierarchy where the conductor barks orders.

"It's an ideal ensemble to play contemporary music with," Schick said.

Roxana Popescu is a San Diego writer.



La Jolla Symphony is a mix of students, amateurs and musicians who are professionally trained but earn a living outside the symphony. Peggy Peattie / San Diego Union-Tribune photos



Time is the issue, both for the performers and the listeners in Toru Takemitsu's "From Me Flows What You Call Time," the centerpiece of the orchestra's time-centric opening program.