

Dec 2003

# Uncommon Things

*No one really sounds like Neruda.*

**M**y chief reason for attending the recent concert of the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus was a desire to hear a big orchestral-choral work by contemporary American composer Cary Ratcliff. But it was also invigorating to be reminded of how authentically good this "amateur" ensemble is. Neither Harvey Sollberger's orchestra nor David Chase's chorus sounds like a

**REVIEW**  
JONATHAN SAVILLE

bunch of amateurs, for whom one must make indulgent excuses. These are evidently musicians with thoroughly professional skills, who have chosen some other profession but who enjoy keeping their hands in by playing or singing in a first-rate organization. To hear (for example) the violin section engaged in a unison passage in which every single player is right on pitch, with the resultant blooming and lustrous sound of 25 violins playing as one, is not an experience an inveterate concertgoer is going to look down on. The winds, too, are of professional quality, technically assured and (notably the woodwind soloists) gifted with sensitive musicianship; and when have you last heard a live orchestral concert, even by a famous orchestra, in which the entire evening went by without a solitary glitch from the horns? You could have heard it in this lively program at Mandeville Auditorium. It was particularly engaging to witness Geoff Brooks, better known to local music lovers as the Athenaeum's music director, identifying himself moment after moment as an inspired master of the kettle drums.

Brooks had ample opportunity to show off his prowess in the first two items on the program. The unifying theme of the evening was Hispanic music, which meant music by Spanish and Latin American composers or inspired by those traditions. Naturally, one expected colorful orchestrations, exciting dance rhythms, and the fiery Latin spirit, and the works that began the program — *La Fuerza del Mariachi* (A Mexican Overture) by American Jeff Nevin, *Huapango* by Mexican José Pablo Moncayo, and the Dances from *The Three-Cornered Hat* by Spaniard Manuel de Falla — copiously supplied what was wanted. Indeed, the first two might well have been defined as short concertos for

percussion and orchestra, which is why I singled out Geoff Brooks for his remarkably prominent part.

*La Fuerza del Mariachi* and *Huapango* were in fact very much alike, in spite of the radically different backgrounds of their composers. Moncayo (1912–1958), from Guadalajara, was in the direct line of the folklore-inspired style so eloquently promoted by his teacher, Carlos Chávez. The unusually diversified young Jeff Nevin, in contrast, holds a doctorate from UCSD's avant-garde music department, is a professional trumpeter and a college professor (at Southwestern College), and has played with such pop artists as Kenny Loggins and the Moody Blues. But he is no stranger to the Latin American tradition, having founded his own mariachi band and extensively written and lectured on mariachi music. In his lively and vividly scored *Mexican Overture*, he spoke the musical language of Chávez and Moncayo as if it were his own.

Nevin also served as conductor for the first half of the concert, where he and the orchestral musicians seemed perfectly attuned to each other in their striving for precision, brilliance and propulsion. Perhaps the more refined (read "French") manner of Falla's Hispanicism could have been treated with greater nuance, but the vital center of these excerpts from the composer's great ballet score was never in doubt.

After the intermission came the Ratcliff work, for which David Chase took Nevin's place at the podium. *Ode to Common Things* is a large-scale composition setting a selection of poems from Pablo Neruda's monumental *Odas Elementales*, in which the ancient poetic tradition of odes composed to commemorate grandiose figures and heroic actions is converted into a series of tributes to anything the poet feels enthusiastic about, from love, life, energy, and hope to scissors, artichokes, onions, and bread. Neruda's style, here as everywhere in his work, is a heady mixture of earthiness, sensuality, simplicity, bold dislocations of rational thought, and sudden eruptions of the profound and the cosmic in the middle of the concrete and everyday. He is Walt Whitman transformed by Surrealism. But no one really sounds like Neruda:

Pan,  
qué fácil  
y qué profundo eres:  
en la bandeja blanca  
de la panadería  
se alargan tus hileras  
como utensilios, platos  
o papeles,  
y de pronto  
la ola  
de la vida,  
lo conjunción del germen  
y del fuego,  
creces, creces  
de pronto  
como  
cintura, boca, senos,  
colinas de la tierra,  
vidas,  
sube el calor, te inunda  
la plenitud, el viento  
della fecundidad,  
y entonces  
se inmoviliza tu color de oro...

("Bread, how simple and profound you are; on the bakery's white trays your rows stretch out like utensils, plates or papers, and all at once, the wave of life, the joining of seed and fire, you grow, grow all at once like waist, mouth, breasts, hills of the earth, lives, the heat rises, fullness inundates you, the wind of fertility, and then your golden color is infixed...") Has any other poet ever conceived of the baking of bread as a sexual act?

Of course, Neruda has his shortcomings. This great poet was a sucker-up to Stalin, praising the Soviet dictator at the height of the purges and massacres. In this respect, he was like Ezra Pound, another great modern poet and a sucker-up to Mussolini. And there have been many others like them. But, as W.H. Auden pertinently remarks, time

Worships language and forgives  
Everyone by whom it lives;  
Pardons cowardice, conceit,  
Lays its honors at their feet.  
Time that with this strange excuse  
Pardoned Kipling and his views,  
And will pardon Paul Claudel,  
Pardons him for writing well.

Auden's comments could just as well refer to Neruda; and it is not Neruda the self-deceiving, morally culpable communist (who died 30 years ago) but Neruda the magnificent, generous, life-affirming poet (whose verse will endure in perpetuity) whom Cary Ratcliff celebrates in his equally magnificent *Ode to Common Things*.

Ratcliff, judging by this triumphantly expressive and accessible piece, is one of those



Pablo Neruda

**La Jolla Symphony & Chorus; Jeff Nevin and David Chase, conductors**  
**Mandeville Auditorium**  
Nevin, *La Fuerza del Mariachi*; Moncayo, *Huapango*; Falla, *Dances from The Three-Cornered Hat*; Ratcliff, *Ode to Common Things*

composers who have avoided the avant-garde fashions that riddled the 20th Century, and whose works have suffered the consequences by remaining virtually unknown to the community of serious music lovers. How can it be that a composer of this quality, capable of the inventive and often thrilling writing that manifests itself in his Neruda settings, should not have a single entry in the major printed or online catalogues of classical music recordings?

Admittedly, his music is not atonal, not pandissonant, not mind-numbingly repetitive, not bound by an abstract formula. It is filled with harmonies, textures, colors, and melodic phrases that express and induce feelings. Like Neruda's poetry, it remains in contact with the world. When in the text someone is riding horseback, you can hear the galloping in the orchestra. When — in the "Ode to Bread" that concludes

the work — Neruda turns from the sensual and the sexual to the political, and invokes the worldwide human struggle to make sure there is “*tierra y pan para todos*” (“land and bread for everyone”), Ratcliff comes up with a musical setting of comparable nobility, that stirs the heart and mind without any hint of sentimentality or hokeyness. Throughout, his music is radiant with imagination, and again and again one has to use that taboo word to describe it: beautiful. No wonder it’s neglected.

In the Mandeville performance, David Chase conducted with immense authority and passion. Once again the orchestra rose to the occasion; the three soloists (soprano Victoria Mature, mezzo Ava Baker Liss, and tenor Marco La Bastida) sang exquisitely; and the splendid chorus seemed to revel in Ratcliff’s wonderfully idiomatic choral writing.

However, it must be said that the conditions of performance were far from ideal. Everyone (except its designers) knows what a horrible hall Mandeville Auditorium is, and in this case its irremediable defects were more deleterious than usual. Although the chorus is a vast one — well over 100 strong — the acoustics of the hall, combined with their placement way upstage, grossly unbalanced the relationship between chorus and orchestra. It was not that the orchestra played too loudly. The trouble

was the perpetual veil over the choral sound, so that the impact of the choral parts (which, after all, are the heart of this music) was greatly diminished. I also regretted the idea of replacing the rolled Spanish *r* by its American equivalent, a decision that rendered the enunciation of Neruda’s delectable words even more unintelligible. (To make up for it — partially — an English translation appeared on a supertitle screen.)

Still, why quibble? The signal accomplishment of the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus was to have allowed us to hear this wonderful (and heretofore unknown) music in the first place, and to have performed it with so much skill and devotion. ■

---

SAN DIEGO  
**Reader**

JANUARY 8, 2004

**SANDIEGOREADER.COM**