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Review | Kansas City Symphony at the Lyric Theatre

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Special to The Star

Creation history formed the backdrop of the Kansas City Symphony's inventive concert Friday night at the Lyric Theater.

It opened with "The Representation of Chaos" from the beginning of Franz Josef Haydn's 1796-98 "Die Schöpfung" (the Creation) oratorio, which is five or six minutes of music reminiscent of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" overture.

This musical depiction of the formless void described in Genesis is scored mostly for strings with horns, winds and a tympani. Friday night the horns were separated from the rest of the ensemble.

This thinned out the sound, and Haydn's elegant classical period sonorities were served badly by the horns' placement.

Something also sounded suspiciously out of tune at the very beginning of the piece, though this perception quickly vanished.

Psychologist Carl Jung thought creation myths are fixed in every human psyche, and Darius Milhaud's 1923 "la création du monde" ballet music takes African myth as its starting point instead of the Old Testament and John Milton sources that Haydn favored.

Milhaud visited Harlem in 1923, heard American jazz on street corners, and had an epiphany. He wrote music at speed all his life - 443 opus numbers, ten times Rachmaninoff's output - and premiered this work in Paris later that same year.

Haydn's idea of chaos is positively A-B compared to Milhaud's, whose big, 17-piece, Harlem jazz-band scoring is perfect for the score's crypto-bluesy, art-house, I'm-a-hipster-too vibe.

It's not terribly compelling, but so what? "la création du monde" is interesting and quaint, maybe even beguiling. It's like the Model T cars one sees from time to time in Kansas City traffic today.

It's - dare we say it? - fun! And like those cars, the music still holds it own, for the most part.

There's even a touch of birdsong in this creation story, and conductor Michael Stern brought out wonderfully a side of Milhaud's music that's often lost in its usual clang and bustle: Darius Milhaud was a happy camper, and he could write very sweet-natured music.

Milhaud's idea of chaos is positively A-B compared to Avner Dorman's, whose "Frozen in Time" percussion concerto made its American orchestral debut Friday night, as did Austrian

guest soloist Martin Grubinger.

Dorman says "Frozen in Time refers to imaginary snapshots of the Earth's geological development from prehistoric times to the present day."

Dorman, a rising young Israeli composer, scored this three-movement work for full orchestra and 23 different percussion instruments, principally marimba and vibraphone. All 23 of which Grubinger played with breathtaking mastery.

The audience got so wound up it applauded after every movement, and kept doing it in the second half. (Stop that, please!)

Think of Henry Mancini full of mescaline and steroids and Bartok. This provocative, exciting music should be heard again and again.

The concert's second half was Antonin Dvorák's 1889 Symphony No. 8, a cheerful tribute to nature with a famous birdsong motif.

The symphony played it with workmanlike polish. Hearing it play music, that one has heard many other orchestras play, reminds one of how far our symphony has come.

Stern's control is evident in its unison tempi and dynamics, and especially in phrasing. Friday night the symphony turned some wonderful phrases in the Dvorák's third movement.

The Kansas City Symphony is becoming a very good orchestra that keeps getting better.

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