

WASHINGTON, Kennedy Center | 14th March 2019

Music Review

NSO presents an exuberant panorama of early music

By **Amanda Vosburgh**

March 15



Timbres of strings, winds and harpsichord stacked in throbbing dissonance, a grinding wall of sound melting into ordered harmony — so began the world, according to French baroque composer Jean-Féry Rebel. So, too, began the National Symphony Orchestra’s program Thursday at the Kennedy Center, which opened with Rebel’s wildly imaginative “Le Cahos” (“Chaos”), the first movement of “Les Élémens” (“The Elements”). Under the skillful direction of early-music specialist Ton Koopman, the NSO offered a vibrant panorama of baroque and classical works.

Early-music specialist Ton Koopman led the National Symphony Orchestra on Thursday evening. (Kennedy Center)

After “Le Cahos” came a suite from Jean Philippe Rameau’s “Les Indes Galantes” (“The Amorous Indies”), assembled by Koopman. Rameau’s opera sets its episodes in far-flung locales: Ottoman Turkey, Inca Peru, Persia and North America. Whirling country dances evoked the genteel tastes of Rameau’s Parisian audiences, yet the flavor of an exotic imaginary was distinctly

present. Koopman underscored the suite’s more lighthearted moments with playfully timed flourishes, eliciting laughter from the audience. A symphony by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach ended the first half, its more serious disposition contrasting the brightly energetic French works that preceded it.

‘Les Indes Galantes’: Subversive savages in a musical digestif

The program’s highlight was undoubtedly Mozart’s Serenade No. 6 in D, the “Serenata Notturna,” which opened the second half. This showcased some of the orchestra’s principal players — Nurit Bar-Josef and Marissa Regni, violins; Daniel Foster, viola; Robert Oppelt, bass; Jauvon Gilliam, timpani — as well as the composer’s creativity, particularly the final rondo, led by Koopman at breakneck tempo, in which the soloists each got to riff on the rondo’s playful theme in cadenzas.

The program concluded with an elegant yet appropriately tongue-in-cheek rendition of Haydn’s Symphony No. 83 in G Minor, “La Poule” (“The Hen”). The first movement’s “clucking” theme, which reminded its early French audiences of the bobbing of a chicken’s head, was rendered with apt humor, and the andante second movement was tender and unhurried. A spirited minuet and galloping vivace brought **the audience to its feet for a standing ovation before Koopman led the orchestra in an encore**, a repeat of Rameau’s “Rondeau.”

The evening as a whole offered an eloquent defense of the breadth and inventiveness of early music, upending the misconception that baroque music is serious or dull. It's a rare treat to see a major orchestra tackle works like these.

Amanda Vosburgh was a 2018 fellow of the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism.

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