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Muti and the CSO revel in the brave new worlds of 'Alternative Energy'

By Andrew Patner

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A music director's selection of an orchestra's composers in residence reveals much about the conductor's interest in contemporary music and how it relates to the general repertoire and to the public. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra played a role in establishing what is now an accepted tradition when John Corigliano was selected in 1987 to work alongside music director Georg Solti as the CSO's first composer in residence. Corigliano's technical virtuosity and populist sympathies matched Solti's own tastes, which also had brought major new works from Michael Tippett and David Del Tredici.

Daniel Barenboim appointed two women composers; first, fellow Israeli Shulamit Ran and then the American Augusta Read Thomas. Both were American-trained extenders of European Modernist traditions, but they also continued Corigliano's worthy cheerleading for an eclectic range of mostly younger colleagues. An odd interregnum followed when the CSO was without a music director with two non-resident composers, Osvaldo Golijov and Mark-Anthony Turnage.

Riccardo Muti shook things up when he picked two young artists with keen interests in electro-acoustic music and multimedia to share the composer-in-residence post: American-born Mason Bates and British transplant Anna Clyne.

Loyalty and devotion — whether to teachers, composers, institutions or pieces of music — is a key part of Muti's makeup. His commitment to showcase the works of Bates and Clyne even before they had written any pieces specifically for him and the CSO is strong; he has studied their scores with the intensity others might reserve for Wagner or Schoenberg. With the world premiere of Bates' "Alternative Energy" Thursday night at Symphony Center, Muti showed his commitment worthwhile. (Clyne's "Night Ferry" makes its world-premiere bow next week.)

Bates, 35, whose roots are in American composition, liberal arts and nightclub DJ work, has produced his most convincing, integrated and appealing large-scale work to date with electronics — which he ran himself from an onstage laptop — strategically placed within the score and in their sounding on speakers across the hall. The four movement, 24-minute work "Alternative Energy" surveys modern man's use and abuse of energy — from tinkering with Tevatrons to nuclear dependence and meltdown to a distant future's return to nature and fire, while exploring different propulsions of musical energy and even toe-tapping rhythms.

Principal percussionist Cynthia Yeh was almost a compositional collaborator in helping select, test and create instruments from auto junkyard scraps. Concertmaster Robert Chen showed himself wholly at home in American and Chinese fiddling. Bates kept himself and his technological and techno

contributions in the background, letting the listener focus on his careful structuring and tight scoring across the orchestra.

Some might regard the effects as reminiscent of next-generation film scoring or computer gaming, but I found any such parallels a legitimate evocation of the zeitgeist. Muti was alert to each measure and idea, at times appearing to physically revel in discovering a new world. A happy audience and orchestra welcomed Bates back onstage for three curtain calls.

Arthur Honegger's 1923 "Pacific 231," Symphonic Movement No. 1, not heard downtown since the CSO's greatest new-music advocate of all time, Frederick Stock, led it in 1930, is itself an exercise in musical representation of propulsive energy. Its six-minute length made it a perfect prelude to the Bates' work.

Cesar Franck's 1886-1888 Symphony in D Minor, once a staple of high-school orchestras and mid-20th-century LP recordings, is another of those works that Muti devotedly has brought back to life throughout his career. With an impassioned, detailed performance of the work's never-ending recycled themes, he almost made us believe that there was something there. Scott Hostetler's seductive English horn was with him all the way.

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