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In Muti's hands, new Mason Bates work presses the right buttons with CSO audience

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Riccardo Muti continues to throw his clout behind his choices as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's resident composers, Mason Bates and Anna Clyne. Their very different musical voices, he believes, resonate strongly with today's concert audiences and thus deserve the widest hearing he can give them.

Clyne has yet to have one of her orchestral pieces performed on the subscription series; that will occur at next week's concerts. Meanwhile, Bates is getting the red-carpet treatment. On Thursday night, just two days after the CSO had announced Bates' and Clyne's contracts had been extended another two years, Muti led the world premiere of Bates' latest orchestral piece, "Alternative Energy," at Symphony Center.

These weekend performances are in preparation for Muti and the orchestra's taking the work to California in mid-month as part of their first West Coast tour together. The music director also is including the CSO-commissioned "Alternative Energy" among the three programs with which he and the orchestra are to open the 2012-13 season of New York's Carnegie Hall in October. How many other music directors have campaigned so heavily on behalf of their composers?

To judge from the prolonged applause and cheers that erupted from the younger-than-usual crowd attending Thursday's first performance of "Alternative Energy," Muti is backing another Bates crowd-pleaser.

Like the composer's "The B-Sides," which Muti and the CSO played here last May, "Alternative Energy" incorporates electronic sounds into the orchestra fabric. Here, however, they are more subtly layered within a huge percussion battery that is augmented by car parts Bates found in a junkyard. Seated at stage rear, the composer triggered the prerecorded electronic sounds from his laptop.

Mankind's use and abuse of increasingly powerful energy sources through real and imaginary ages forms the scenario. The first sounds we hear are the accelerando cranking of a car motor and a bluesy fiddle tune meant to evoke auto-industry pioneer Henry Ford, circa 1896. Bates' neon-lit orchestral palette is laced with billowing waves of John-Adams-like post-minimalist sound and mechanistic rhythms that owe as much to jazz and hip-hop as they do to Stravinsky.

The "cranking" motif turns ominous as more powerful energy sources come into play. The second movement, set in present-day Chicago, interweaves sound samples from a particle collider (recorded at Fermilab outside Batavia) with raucous brass riffs that build to a take-no-prisoners finish.

The third section, set in Xinjiang province, an actual source of Chinese energy production, in an imaginary 2112, brings back the fiddle tune, distorted, on solo flute. Rising and falling waves of soft strings yield to an increasingly foreboding crescendo of pounding electronica, like a nuclear reactor approaching meltdown. When cataclysm arrives, it's with a mighty *thwoop* and a sigh.



The final movement ventures even further ahead in time, to an "Icelandic rain forest" of 2222, a weird, futuristic landscape of distant bird sounds (shades of Respighi's "The Pines of Rome") and further echoes of material heard earlier. All this leads to a big, final flourish that's meant to suggest the victory of the naturalistic world over mankind's planet-despoiling pursuit of new and better founts of energy.

Whether you take it as a cautionary tale or as pure music, "Alternative Energy" is exceedingly well-made and goes down very easily. It's the kind of score that brings out the musical dramatist in Muti: He and the CSO members – most notably principal percussionist Cynthia Yeh and concertmaster Robert Chen – threw themselves into the music with considerable mega-wattage of their own.

While I found the piece enjoyable and entertaining, I do wish Bates would dig deeper harmonically, challenge himself and his audience rather more. Navigating the fine line between accessibility and complexity, he continues to opt too readily for the former, in my view.

Muti preceded the Bates premiere with Arthur Honegger's "Pacific 231," another piece about energy, this one an early 20th-century musical depiction of a 300-ton locomotive hurtling through a dark night. The performance found a well-oiled CSO machine operating at peak efficiency. Muti even got to levitate. Twice.

I am glad Cesar Franck's Symphony in D minor is making a comeback after decades of neglect, for it is a splendid work with memorable tunes and an ingenious cyclical structure. Muti rightly esteems it highly and made a fine recording of it during his tenure with the Philadelphia Orchestra in the 1980s.

His reading on Thursday was extremely well-judged. The rubato was expressively applied but never carried to extremes, inner voices and other instrumental detail brought to the fore in a way that always clarified the musical argument. Everything breathed musical integrity and idiomatic feeling. The maestro asked for a full brass sound and he got it, trumpets blazing forth magnificently. Scott Hostetler's English horn solo in the slow movement was sensitively played. Too bad about principal horn Dale Clevenger's several splattered entrances.

The program will be repeated 8 p.m. Saturday and 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$27-\$207; 312-294-3000, cso.org.

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