

Robert Harris

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<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/two-different-worlds-of-classical-music-show-what-they-have-in-common/article14477064/>

Two different musical worlds were on display in Toronto this weekend, two aspects of a classical art that was wide enough to easily accommodate both.

It was glamour and virtuosity on Saturday night, as men in dinner jackets mingled with women in high-fashion gowns at Roy Thomson Hall, as the Toronto Symphony Orchestra presented their season-opening gala. With music provided by one of the world's great virtuoso showmen, the Chinese pianist Lang Lang, the glitzy occasion had all the buzz of a one-of-a-kind event.

Critics have had a lot to say about Lang's Mozart, not all of it kind, and you can see why. With a command of the piano that is phenomenal, Lang can make the instrument shout, whisper, dance, glide – do whatever he wants it to. What he doesn't seem to want it to do in his Mozart interpretations is respect the joyous pulse of the music. Lang's Mozart pauses, reflects, anguishes, whispers, broods, but seldom just gets on with it. The lack of a clear rhythmic through-line in the music was especially galling in the first concerto he performed, the wonderful and breezy G major (whose last movement is based on a theme Mozart borrowed from his pet bird, for goodness sakes). Nothing in Mozart is ever just pure fun, but this one comes close to it. Or should. On Saturday it didn't.

Lang's approach to Mozart was more effective in the second concerto, in C minor, an anguished, brooding piece of music in its own right. Here, Lang's take on the music seemed more in keeping with its true character (with the understanding that no one ever really knows what that is with the sly man-child from Salzburg). But as I was sitting in my seat, scribbling down all sorts of cavils and questions about Lang's playing in my little notebook, the heavens just opened up before me in musical perfection in the middle of the second movement of the C minor, the kind of moment we lovers of classical music live for. And I was reminded that keeping an open mind about matters musical is almost always a virtue. Rushing to judgment almost never is. The range of what works in classical music can be very wide indeed.

Some of that breadth was also on display this weekend as Tapestry New Opera presented their annual Tapestry Briefs concert, to a charmed and dedicated audience that numbered in the hundreds, rather than the thousands. But that didn't make the performances any less excellent, or exciting. Tapestry Briefs are 12 short operatic scenes that were created under pressure-cooker conditions in only 10 days in late August by teams of four composers and four lyricists, forced to work together and then change partners almost as fast as they could churn out a scene. Speed-dating meets high art. So, rather than the music we heard being 230 years old, as it was on Saturday, it was instead about three weeks old.

Thus the show these scenes made up had something of the spirit of a sketch-comedy/improv night, one tiny drama following another, on the widest range of topics. A woman frightened by an incubus she senses hiding in her bedroom wall, two women switched at birth mourning their common mother, three kids texting each other in hilarious fashion, a man with cancer trying to convince his son to kill him, a woman her husband suspects of murdering all his ex-girlfriends, who poisons him (the last played for comedy) and more. Scenes shifting abruptly, one to the next after two or three minutes of intensity.

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And while many of the combinations of composer and lyricist worked well, the real stars of the show were the four singers who instantly, sometimes within 30 seconds, moved from one character to another. What great vocal actors all four were. None of them strangers to Tapestry or to the operatic scene in the city. Soprano Carla Huhtanen was especially poignant as a woman with fertility issues struggling to present a friend with a gift at a baby shower. Krisztina Szabo put her powerful mezzo to great effect several times, most dramatically as a hospital attendant who begs God to allow her to see Him, as her dying patients seem able to do (both scenes composed by Cecilia Livingston, to words by Julie Tepperman and Morris Panych respectively). Baritone Peter McGillivray, with great sensitivity, played the father begging his son to kill him (librettist David Yee, music again by Livingston), and tenor Keith Klassen was chilling as the interrogator in a scene out of Orwell's *1984* (lyrics Nicholas Billon, Christopher Thornborrow, composer).

What was interesting about the weekend was not how different the two musical experiences were, but how similar. The twenty- and thirtysomething artists Tapestry brought together were working in a tradition that Peter Oundjian, Lang Lang and Mozart would have recognized instantly. A tradition of creative musical imagination being brought to bear on the human condition. We saw two examples of that process in operation at two ends of the musical spectrum. Both worked just fine.