

MUSIC

Ecstasy meets improv in new viola concerto

REVIEW: SPCO premieres the work by Aaron Jay Kernis.

By MICHAEL ANTHONY Special to the Star Tribune

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Violist Paul Neubauer.

Aaron Jay Kernis, who speaks softly but writes big, passionate, highly lyrical music that makes you sit up and take notice, has lived in New York City most of his life but has been an important presence in Twin Cities music for more than two decades.

Winner of the two biggest prizes in music — the Pulitzer and the Grawemeyer Award — the 54-yearold Kernis has held numerous positions here: new music advisor of the Minnesota Orchestra, composer-in residence with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and the American Composers Forum and, most recently, co-founder and director of the Minnesota Orchestra's Composer Institute, without doubt the country's most important post-college composer training program. ([Kernis resigned](#) from the Institute last October after Osmo Vänskä resigned as music director. The Institute's future is uncertain.) Audiences here have also heard a good deal of Kernis's music, and this week they're hearing the latest: [a new Viola Concerto](#) that is being premiered by the St. Paul Chamber orchestra with Paul Neubauer as soloist.

As revealed in the performance at the Ordway Center Thursday night, Kernis's concerto is a large three-movement work with vividly contrasting colors and carefully worked-out structures that offers the viola — as well as the orchestra — ample technical challenges

along with numerous opportunities to show off the instrument's unique, dark sound. Passages of intense lyricism, especially in the movement marked "Romance," approach a kind of ecstasy that is one of the hallmarks of Kernis's music.

Other sections — much of the first movement - are more up-tempo and virtuosic and driven by pungent rhythms. Though tightly and cogently constructed, the concerto has the feeling of improvisation.

The long final movement is perhaps the most interesting of them and is probably the heart of the work. Titled "A Song My Mother Taught Me," the movement draws on two sources: "Tumbalalaika," a Yiddish folk song, and a melody from a set of piano pieces by Robert Schumann.

ST. PAUL CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

What: World premiere of Aaron Jay Kernis' Viola Concerto.

When: 8 p.m. Sat.

Where: Ordway Center, 345 Washington St., St. Paul.

Tickets: \$10-\$40, 651-291-1144, or thespco.org.

As the movement progresses, the Schumann number deconstructs, whereas the Yiddish tune goes the other way: assembling gradually over the course of 10 variations until we hear it in its entirety near the end. This could be called the "Lady in the Dark" motif. In that revered Broadway musical, we hear only fragments of Kurt Weill's beguiling ballad "My Ship," and not until the end do we hear the whole song. There's something very satisfying psychologically about this device, whether we hear it in a Broadway show or in a concert hall. It suggests the achievement of some kind of psychic wholeness (which is what Weill's heroine, Lisa Elliott, achieves) or maybe it simply means, a theme so common in art of all kinds, that we're finally returning home.

Neubauer was an immaculate soloist, playing throughout with rich, varied tone and nimble dexterity. Conductor Scott Yoo, substituting for an ailing Roberto Abbado, led a thoughtful, judiciously paced performance. Kernis has given the musical world something it needs: a viola concerto — and a good one. There aren't many. Berlioz, who also gave us a good one, "Harold in Italy," once said "Of all the instruments in the orchestra, the viola is the one whose excellent qualities have been longest ignored."

For the rest of the evening, concertmaster Steven Copes served as conductor — or "leader" — in the Baroque manner, that is, conducting while playing violin. He's good at

this, as it turns out. Not every violinist is. And, of course, it's easier to do double-duty with a chamber orchestra than with a symphony orchestra.

The repertoire, too, needs to be carefully chosen. The choices here were wise: Stravinsky's neo-classic ballet "Apollon musagete" and Haydn's Symphony No. 101, "The Clock." Copes and his crew of string players — all, except cellos, standing while playing — easily captured the delicate charms of the Stravinsky, though leaving one with the impression that this music works better in the ballet theater than the concert hall. The Haydn, which closed the evening, was vigorous, amiable and smartly paced.

Michael Anthony writes about music.