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'Rewind' mixes classical, electronica

By Georgia Rowe, CONTRIBUTOR

THERE'S MORE than one way to make a musical timeline, and the New Century Chamber Orchestra came up with a novel approach over the weekend: start in the present and work your way backward.

Saturday evening at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, the San Francisco-based string orchestra joined forces with guest conductor Paul Haas and a handful of well-chosen soloists to perform music from four centuries. The cleverly constructed multimedia program, titled "Rewind," encompassed works from Baroque masterworks to 21st century electronica.

That's a lot of stylistic ground to cover in a 95-minute, no-intermission concert, and "Rewind," which was devised by the New York-based Haas for his own classical music production company, Sympho, presented it all in a kind of total immersion experience. In addition to music, there was installation art, lighting and an uninterrupted progression of sound; there were no breaks, just one piece flowing into the next, start to finish.

It certainly wasn't the usual concert format; that much was clear even before "Rewind" started. The stage was a square platform in the middle of the forum, with seating on all four sides; as people entered, a large kinetic sculpture (by Reuben Margolin) gently undulated overhead, and composer/DJ Mason Bates, working on a laptop from a station in an upstairs balcony, sent electronic music burbling through the hall. Additional spots upstairs were used throughout the evening to position soloists in the major works.

Once people were seated, the program started with Schnittke's 1977 Concerto Grosso for Two Violins, Harpsichord and Strings. Violinists Anne Akiko Meyers and New Century's concertmaster, Raushan Akhmedyarova, joined harpsichordist Gilbert Martinez as the excellent soloists for this acerbic, elliptical work, which starts out sounding like a Baroque concerto but ends with a contemporary flourish.

From there, Haas led the orchestra back through time, with works by Alexander Raskatov, James MacMillan, Stravinsky, Villa-Lobos and Schoenberg yielding to Mozart, Marini, Corelli and Purcell. Ambient music by Bates, Joshua Penman and Judd Greenstein, composed specifically for "Rewind," served as connective tissue between the major works.

The great thing about a program like this is its variety; if there's something you don't particularly like, just hold on — another piece will come along in a few minutes.

Not everything on the program was a particularly good fit. New Century has played Schoenberg's "Verklarte Nacht" (Transfigured Night) on other programs with greater success; in this lineup, it was a low point. Midway through a set of shorter works, it was simply too big and too long; people around me started reading their programs and checking their watches.

Still, much of the program worked brilliantly. Haas conducted dynamically, and as one piece gave way to the next, he and the orchestra created a fascinating through line, with old and new works bouncing off one another in revelatory ways. Raskatov's "5 Minuten aus dem Leben WAM" (five minutes in the life of WAM), with its 18th-century nod to Mozart, received a graceful performance by Meyers and the orchestra.

MacMillan's "As Others See Us" simultaneously evoked the Italian Renaissance and American jazz. Marini's "Passacaglio" and Purcell's "A Bird's Prelude" (from "The Faerie Queen") sounded sublime.

Best of all was an excerpt from Stravinsky's Suite from "Pulcinella," which featured a beautiful solo by oboist Robin May. No matter what kind of musical journey you're taking, it seems Stravinsky will always be one of the most rewarding stops along the way.