



Stephen Burns conducts composer Kevin James' "Sadako: Prayers for Peace." photo by John Dziekan

MUSIC REVIEW

Festival conveys hopes, promise of today's music

By John von Rhein

Tribune music critic

When is an audience-building enterprise also a bounteous celebration of the music of today? The festival titled "Sonic Impact: Creating New Art Music in a Global Culture" that filled the Museum of Contemporary Art over the weekend clearly had both objectives in mind.

New Music Chicago and the MCA organized this locally unprecedented convergence of some 25 composers, ensembles and solo musicians that began Saturday afternoon and continued through Sunday. Many of the more than 15 concerts and related events were free.

I caught the opening concerts and was pleased to find myself surrounded by eager, engaged listeners, including children. Given the high level of creative and performing talent represented in the festival, I came away feeling sanguine about the future of new music in Chicago.

Saturday brought the premiere of "Sadako: Prayers for Peace," a multimedia work performed by the Fulcrum Point New Music Project and guests under auspices of the Chicago Humanities Festival's Children's Humanities Festival.

Based on the book by Eleanor Coerr and using the book's charming chalk illustrations by Ed Young (which were flashed on a screen behind the ensemble), the 45-minute cantata melds images, narration and music by Kevin James to recount the poignant real-life story of Sadako Sasaki, a spirited young Japanese girl whose life was effectively snuffed out by the atomic blast

that devastated Hiroshima in 1945.

As the composer points out in his program note, the dying child's hope and courage helped to inspire an enduring world peace movement. With the threat of mass nuclear suicide again bullying its way to the center of the world stage, "Sadako: Prayers for Peace" could not be more timely.

The score interweaves solo and choral material — sung by a baritone, soprano and alto along with the Indiana University School of Music Contemporary Vocal Ensemble and Sadako Oratorio Chamber Ensemble — with spoken narrative and instrumental illustration. Some of the music's most effective touches are the simplest: women's voices floating above the whispered chant of other female voices to a poem about a wildflower growing out of the burned soil of Hiroshima. At times, James' use of modality suggests Japanese temple music, although the itchy percussion part situates the score very much in the present.

"Sadako" makes its plea for peace and understanding without milking audience tears or dwelling unduly on Hiroshima's horrors. Music, song, image and spoken word form a seamless and deeply moving meditation. Unutterable sadness at last gives way to the hope that the warring nations will learn to make a better, safer world for their own Sadakos.

This is a tricky score to put together, but Saturday's performers did so very well under the direction of Fulcrum Point's Stephen Burns.

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