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A Forward Path

The Fort Worth Symphony premiere an interesting new piece from Mexican composer Antonio Juan-Marcus, along with Brahms and Ravel.

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Fort Worth — One of the many strengths of Miguel Harth-Bedoya's tenure as music director of the **Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra** has been the frequent presentation of music by living composers, including a number of premieres. Friday night at Bass Performance Hall, that tradition continued as Harth-Bedoya conducted the premiere of the 18-minute, multi-movement tone poem *Canto de Semillas* (*Song of Seeds*) of Antonio Juan-Marcos. A native of Mexico City currently living in California, Juan-Marcos is here inspired aesthetically by the naturalism of Vivaldi's much loved *Four Seasons* cycle, and even more so by 20th-century Mexican poet Octavio Paz's collection *Arbol Adentro* (*A Tree Within*).

Canto de Semillas represents a branch off from the lavish neo-impressionism that has swept across American orchestral composition in recent decades; instead of the thick orchestration and evocative but deliberately obscure titles that have dominated the movement so far, Juan-Marcos heads each movement with a more specific quotation drawn from Paz's poetry.

Juan-Marcos also draws on a much leaner orchestration, as liberated from traditional harmony as anything written in the twentieth century, but with a clean, subtle quality. The listener is less aware of the dissonance, and more aware of the intense and constant flow of colorful timbre.

The first movement, "Bajo tus parpados Madura la semilla del sol" ("Under your eyelids the seed of the sun ripens") opens ominously, but quickly turns to a bright, pointillistic orchestration. The second, "Fuego dormido en la noche, agua que rie despierta" ("Fire asleep in the night, water that wakes laughing") seizes on those words as suggestive of falling rain, with noises of wind from the percussion and rain and fire from a MIDI keyboard in one of the audience boxes just offstage.

The third movement bears the longest title/epigraph: "Chorro de luz: un pajarito cantando en la terraza/ En los valles y montes de tu cuerpo amanece" ("Stream of light: a bird singing in the terrace. In the valleys and mountains of your body it dawns"). An almost squeaky (deliberately so) violin solo opens over a foundation of brass; birdcalls and rhythms of woodpeckers, transcribed for orchestra, weave through a movement leading to a climactic brass chorale.

Thus, Juan-Marcos here presents a new pathway forward in orchestral music, opting for a more delicate, and ultimately more intriguing sound world, through which, in this case, the orchestra and conductor Harth-Bedoya maneuvered neatly and skillfully.

Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, at nearly 50 minutes one of the whoppers of the concerto repertoire, opened the program, with Alessio Bax, an Italian-born member of the piano faculty at SMU, as soloist. Brahms poured some of his most heroic moments—and most difficult piano writing—into this epic concerto. Nor did he spare the orchestra; several of the principals take on exposed moments in the spotlight as well.

For his part, Bax turned in an often elegant, occasionally transcendent moment—for instance, in the radiant moment of recapitulation of the first theme in the first movement, with a rippling piano part floating over the strings. But, while the thousands of notes were unfailingly in place throughout, Bax often left phrases undernourished and wanting of greater assertion and more obvious sculpting. The Andante third movement was easily the high point for this listener, with its extended cello solo (here performed with appropriate romantic emotionalism by principal Allan Steele) and the subsequent almost spooky piano entry; the final iteration of the movement's main theme, veiled with piano trills, provided a particularly arresting moment. Harth-Bedoya and the orchestra here appeared in close to top form, leading through all of Brahms' storms to the final movement, an almost light-hearted epilogue to a largely dark work.



Photo: antoniocomposer.com

Composer Antonio Juan-Marcos