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A Symphonic Homage to Manhattan

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI
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Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

Composer Robert Sirota, right, and conductor Kenneth Kiesler, left, congratulate each other following the world premiere performance of Sirota's work "212."

“Manhattan Takes Manhattan” is the slogan of the Manhattan School of Music’s celebration of its 90th anniversary this year. What better way to assert that theme than the premiere of “212,” a symphony in homage to Manhattan by the composer and native New Yorker Robert Sirota? The piece, which takes its title from the borough’s area code, was played impressively on Thursday by the Manhattan School of Music Symphony, with Kenneth Kiesler conducting, at the John C. Borden Auditorium, where it shared a program with Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 in D.

For a relatively short work (25 minutes), “212” has high ambitions: to portray Manhattan, Mr. Sirota — who has been president of the Manhattan School since 2005 — writes in a program note, as a “place of incomparable majesty, vitality, tragedy and hope.”

If directness can be considered a New York character trait, that quality comes through in Mr. Sirota’s symphony. Complexity for its own sake and expressive obfuscation are not for this energetic and highly professional composer. Although the overall musical language of this score recalls the American Neo-Classicalists, Mr. Sirota’s compositional voice has a distinctive tartness and rhythmic bite. Thick, astringent chromatic harmonies come in tightly bound chords to create nervous sonorities. Yet the textures are always lucid; details come through.

The first movement, “Approaches,” is meant to evoke the impact of seeing the Manhattan skyline on nearing the city. A steady, low pulse in the timpani incites some fidgety riffs in the strings and winds. Brassy, skittish flourishes are enforced by clattering percussion and assertive piano. I’m not sure what this has to do with approaching Manhattan from, say, the Long Island Expressway. But the music was punchy and smart. In a climactic episode the movement ends amid Stravinsky-like frenzy: Mr. Sirota having his “Dance to the Earth” moment.

I wish that in the second movement, “Do Not Hold Doors” (named after the ubiquitous warning on subway cars), Mr. Sirota had made his evocation of big-band jazz more indirect and original. Eventually, though, the jazz riffs splinter, and the music grows bolder. “Lamentation,” the slow movement, scored for strings, is an elegy to victims of 9/11, a subject many composers would be loath to take on. But the modesty of Mr. Sirota’s lament, with its open-hearted harmonies and audible contrapuntal writing, wins you over.

The finale, “O Manhattan,” begins with beckoning offstage horn calls, then segues into a hymnal passage for melting strings. Hokey? Maybe. But artfully done. Soon the finale turns frenetic, building to a shamelessly surging tune, amid brassy glitter and boisterous energy.

Mr. Kiesler drew an assured, colorful performance, winning a prolonged ovation for the players and Mr. Sirota. The account of Mahler’s “Titan” Symphony was solid and winning, if a little scrappy. Still, it was inspiring to hear this youthful work played by young, gifted and palpably enthusiastic musicians.