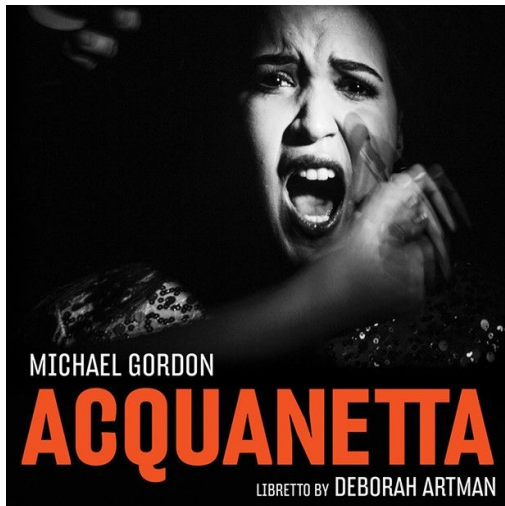


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Review: The L.A. Phil, as only it can, delivers a long weekend of ‘Apollo’ and ‘Flower Power’

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By Mark Swed



Once again the restless Los Angeles Philharmonic has been too ambitious to stick with the traditional single-program model for its four-concert subscription series. What was different this past weekend, though, was that the programs at Walt Disney Concert Hall were not just unrelated. They were radically different. Or were they?

On Thursday and Friday, the thrillingly lively and provocative French early music specialist Emmanuelle Haïm returned to lead a Baroque program performed in a historically minded style with small forces and highlighted by an obscure Handel cantata, “Apollo e Dafne,” about a god’s flirtation with a nymph. Saturday and Sunday, John Adams conducted a large and amplified modern orchestra in the world premiere of Julia Wolfe’s “Flower Power,” a rock ‘n’ roll-ish concerto for the Bang on a Can All-Stars and orchestra.

Wolfe’s fantasia on 1960s make love not war came replete with videos of love-ins and flower-petal confetti falling from the ceiling.

Either of these would be notable outliers for a symphony orchestra. Together they became amazingly relevant to discussions about the #MeToo movement as well as imminent threats of military conflict and climate crises.

Apollo needs no introduction and Handel forgoes an overture, allowing the hotshot god to immediately thump his chest in an opening recitative about how he’s the greatest archer, the greatest at all things, love included. He pursues the lovely Daphne. She rebukes him. When he begins to use his power inappropriately, the nymph turns into a tree to become unattractive to her abuser.

A defeated Apollo, to appear more attractive, stitches a triumphal laurel wreath out of her branches. “If I cannot have you in my heart,” he sings in the cantata’s exceedingly beautiful final aria, “I shall wear you on my brow.” Flower power, indeed.

A handful of stilted recordings of this cantata have been released over the years, none offering much reason for its revival. But given a performance of spectacular musical vitality, one that mixed humor with outrage, one from a woman’s point of view, Haïm’s “Apollo e Dafne” took on a revelatory new aspect.

The young American baritone Jarrett Ott proved an Apollo of smug but charismatic brilliance. French soprano and early music star Sandrine Piau was the gripping, strong-willed Daphne. Though conducting from the harpsichord, Haïm was mostly on her feet, in vivid contact with a small orchestra and bringing her unique combination of modern-day fire and voluptuousness to Handel.

Nor did it hurt that both of her soloists are adept at shifting between old music and new. Kaija Saariaho’s latest opera, “Innocence,” was written for Piau, and it will have its premiere this summer in Aix-en-Provence conducted by L.A. Phil

principal guest conductor Susanna Mälkki. Jarret happened to have jetted to L.A. after starring in the London premiere of “Prisoner of State,” the latest opera by David Lang, who co-founded Bang on a Can with Wolfe and her husband, Peter Gordon.

Amassed on the stage at Disney for “Flower Power” on Sunday afternoon were the six All-Stars with all their electronic and acoustic instruments, seated on an Indian carpet littered with the kind of old lamps and furniture you might have found in a hippie pad on Haight Street during the Summer of Love. A screen made out of a sheet, the kind on which many hippies saw their first Godard or experimental Stan Brakhage films, was draped over the organ for light show projections and video.

Wolfe lately has been producing large-scale, Handelian oratorios about neglected events in American history. Her “Anthracite Fields,” which won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Music, surveyed the plight of Pennsylvania coal miners 150 years ago. “Fire in My Mouth,” given its premiere by the New York Philharmonic a year ago and just out on recording, considers the fire at the New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. In both of these gripping works, Wolfe reveals the profound ramifications of workers’ repression on society.

In “Flower Power,” she now looks for hope, returning to the epoch of three decades ago, when the zeitgeist for change was in turning people on rather than turning them off, a time meant for new myths.

She begins with a druggy atmosphere of a huge orchestra and the soloists in a banging-on-a-can drone mode. The rocking comes in complicated, intricate ways that require as much attending to as, say, Miles Davis’ concerts at the Fillmore did. When Mark Stewart’s bluesy electric guitar wails, the hint is of the creamy textures of Cream. Ken Thomson on his clarinets might be Charles Lloyd loving-in.

Climaxes build and fade, build bigger and fade, joyous but with an edge. Percussion both from the All-Stars’ David Cossin and the L.A. Phil section play a considerable role. At one point when the video shows a clip of protesters carrying a sign that says, “Women for Race and Economic Equality,” we might have been at the Women’s March downtown the day before or among the nymphs in Greek myth. Hippies putting flowers in the guns of National Guardsmen, though, really is another era.

Ultimately “Apollo” and “Flower Power” remained in their own surroundings. Haïm began her program with concertmaster Martin Chalifour as the eloquent soloist in Bach’s G-Minor Violin Concerto and Telemann’s hilariously quirky, croaky violin concerto known as, and sounding like, “The Frogs.”

Adams paired “Flower Power” with his own “Naïve and Sentimental Music,” which the L.A. Phil commissioned and premiered in 2000. A large-scale symphony in all but name, it begins by building on a guitar solo Adams likens to the intro to a Joni Mitchell song that grows into epic orchestral discourse. Heard after “Flower Power,” the epic score sounded like the apex of the epoch of optimism in America that would end with the 2001 terrorist attacks.

But the ultimate power of both the L.A. Phil’s “Apollo” and “Flower Power” were to show, as only this orchestra as this moment dares, flower power — which is to say nature, as the only source of real power. Preserve it, and we preserve ourselves.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-01-20/la-phil-apollo-dafne-julia-wolfe-flower-power>