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Young artists offer not-so-standard concert

By Kari Sayers

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At its concert Sunday night, the Chamber Orchestra of the South Bay - under the baton of Maestro Frances Steiner - celebrated two young and talented musicians: Norwegian-born pianist and composer Ola Gjeilo and Israeli-born mezzo-soprano Iris Malkin. The venue was, as usual, the Norris Theatre in Rolling Hills Estates.

Described as "outside the standard repertoire" by COSB president Robert Miller, the concert differed from anything heard and seen in the South Bay recently.

The orchestra opened with the world premiere of Gjeilo's latest composition, "Colorado," a 12-minute work for strings and piano in three movements, commissioned by and dedicated to COSB and Steiner and funded by the Norwegian government.

It's not exactly Grieg, but it had its moments, especially in the third movement, in which Gjeilo (pronounced YAY-low) himself played the piano. The reaction of the audience members was mixed.

Less tuneful than his choir music and his piano

album - "Rose Stone," a hybrid of rock, classical, jazz and blues - "Colorado," inspired by Colorado scenes, is classical in nature with contemporary as well as Romantic reverberations. While technically skillful - after all, Gjeilo earned a master's degree in composition from Juilliard - the first movement seemed monotonous with a driving, repetitive and pulsating rhythm. The orchestra beautifully brought out the calm, serene and introspective second movement's simple theme. It's doubtful

that "Colorado" is what Gjeilo will be remembered for.

Looking younger than her 31 years, Malkin performed five songs from Gustav Mahler's "Des Knaben Wunderhorn" (The Youth's Magic Horn). Conducted by COSB assistant director Hector Salazar, the orchestra overpowered Malkin's crystal-clear, deep and sonorous mezzo in "Rheinlegendchen" (Little Rhine Legend), but Salazar soon remedied this problem and elicited a dulcet sound from the players in the tone poem, "Wo die sch nen Trompeten blasen" (Where the Shining Trumpets Sound) as well as the other lieder. A favorite was the last one, "Lob des hohen Verstandes" (In Praise of High Intelligence), in which Malkin mimicked the mocking sounds of the cuckoo, donkey and nightingale.

Malkin's German pronunciation was not always comprehensible, at least not in the back rows, but that may have been due to the theater's less than ideal acoustics.

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The second half of the program opened with Spanish composer Joaquin Turina's 1925 piece "La Oracion del Torero" (The Bullfighter's Prayer), a surprisingly good match for Gjeilo's work. Then Malkin reappeared, singing in Spanish the dramatic work "El Amor Brujo" (Love, the Magician), a gypsy's love story Manuel de Falla composed in 1915.

Malkin's reserved demeanor seemed appropriate in "Des Knaben Wunderhorn," but she could have been flashier and more bold in these fiery gypsy songs, music that evokes images of ritual dances, fire and ghosts. With such a magnificent voice, why hold back?

The COSB's annual gala spring concert is scheduled for 8 p.m. April 23 at the Norris Theatre. It will feature pianist Dmitri Levkovich in an all-Beethoven program.

Kari Sayers is a Rancho Palos Verdes freelance writer.

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