



First Person

In the spirit of Scriabin, Mahler, Surfeit's up

By Steven Schick, Special to the U-T,

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Steven Schick conductor La Jolla Symphony. PhotoPablo Mason

La Jolla Symphony and Chorus

What: "Face the Music, Experiences for the Ears and the Eyes," conducted by Steven Schick & David Chase

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.; Oct. 31, 3 p.m.

Where: Mandeville Auditorium, UCSD, La Jolla

Tickets: \$29 (adults); \$26 (seniors); \$15 (students)

Information: (858) 534-4637 or lajollasympphony.com

I was filling my car with gas the other day while watching Lindsay Lohan's latest brush with the law on a little video screen built into the pump when the thought occurred to me: Maybe I don't need to be quite this connected.

The quest for as much information as possible seems to be the overriding cultural motor of our era. Crawling bands of info tell us, even while we're watching television, that the stock market is up, the Chargers down and poor Lindsay in trouble again.

We might try to resist, but we also seem to crave the "poly-stimulus" of streams of information pouring down upon us as though we're riding through a thunderstorm of data in a convertible. How did we get to this place? I'll try to answer as soon as I update my Facebook page.

OK, I'm back.

We are not the first generation for whom saturation was a central strategy. Take classical music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the musical language of the mid-19th century — one based on an equilibrium between the limits of form and an expansive, entropic desire for expression — gave way to a musical language with fewer boundaries and more options, a scenario was created in which more was almost always seen as better.

The push for more at all costs peaked in the first decade of the 20th century when saturation was viewed not as an end point, but a birthright. Listen to the opening harmony of Alexandre Scriabin's "Prometheus." The first chord itself is full to the brim, and the piece expands and opens from there. Scriabin famously pushed his palette of expressive devices beyond sound by including a "color organ." The color organ is essentially a lighting plot written in musical notation, and produces visual effects that the composer describes as "veiled," "misty," and "ecstatic."

The work also features a quasi-concerto element of piano solo, the piano itself the instrument most capable of rendering acoustical saturation.

In next weekend's concert we pair "Prometheus" with Gustav Mahler's mighty Symphony No. 1, subtitled "The Titan." Need we say more? It's a gigantic, euphoric, überwerk, etched unflinchingly in the first-person singular of deep expression.

Mahler calls for a very large orchestra, but he also extends his language in stylistic ways. The work opens with imitations of natural sounds from wind and water to the songs of birds and the rustling of leaves. And, in what was to become a Mahler trademark, he plunges into the forbidden territory of the vernacular, alluding to grotesque waltzes and a klezmer street band.

The piece is written in utterly saturated language — and "The Titan" is by no means Mahler's largest symphonic creation! The ecstatic excesses of the early 20th century are tempered by the knowledge that the purifying floods of war and Depression were just around the corner. And when the overgrowth was washed away, musical artists spent the better part of a hundred years in more austere modes of expression.

But, baby, we're back! The ark has landed. The realm of possibilities expands one more time. We look around and find ourselves neck-deep again in the waters of more and more and ever more. But listen to passages of quiet intensity in the Scriabin, or to the intimacy of chamber music that

pervades Mahler and realize that within the surfeit reside the little connections and moments that make a life worth living.

Within this concert of mega-statements we hope to offer many small and beautiful things. Grab one and treasure it. If nothing else, it will make a fantastic life preserver.

Steven Schick is music director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus and a distinguished professor of music at UCSD.

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