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## Berkeley Symphony/Carneiro, Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, US – review

By Allan Ulrich

The programme's highlight was Jennifer Koh's memorable reading of the Sibelius Violin Concerto

The true strength of the serious music scene in the Bay Area can be found not in the activities of the major organisations, but in the panoply of part-time institutions that seem to have sprung up from a community need and evolved into newsworthy music-makers. The Berkeley Symphony, which provided an international springboard for the career of Kent Nagano, who served as music director for 30 years, is the model of self-generating excellence.

This month, Nagano's successor, Joana Carneiro, launched her sixth season and Berkeley can't get enough of her, though the city must content itself with only four concert sets a year. Carneiro, a Portuguese musician with an impressive CV, is a woman in a profession that shamefully undervalues them. She favours a voluptuous podium style, hair flowing (much like her predecessor). She is also devoted to contemporary music; though her choices in this area may upset tender sensibilities, they won't send anyone running from the concert hall.

The season opened with a Berkeley Symphony commission, the wispy, appealing *Sea Shape* by Oscar Bettison, who is British-born and currently resident in Baltimore. He has delivered 13 minutes of unabashed scene painting, which might find its way into the repertoire. Strings etch quasi-themes, at varying dynamics, interrupted by percussion, winds and brass. What Bettison has captured is the ocean's ebb and flow and the heart-stopping moment between. Carneiro conducted with dedication.

She is still not comfortable with the late Romantic repertoire. Carneiro's reading of the *Enigma Variations* often distilled the requisite Elgarian sentiment. She delivered an expansive "Nimrod" and the violas came through handsomely in the "Ysobel" Variation. But much of the performance seemed rushed, fuzzy in the composer's filigree string and wind writing and resistant to Elgar's moments of rumbustious humour.

Jennifer Koh made the evening memorable. The brilliant young violinist has played with this orchestra earlier, and she performed valiantly in this hall in *Einstein on the Beach* a few years ago. Koh's reading of the Sibelius Violin Concerto traded alluring tone for gritty attacks and building of tension, starting with a first movement cadenza that evoked an eternally frozen landscape barely warmed by the winter sun. Carneiro felt the spirit.



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