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Conductor makes impressive showing with New England Philharmonic

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By Aaron Keebaugh

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Tianhui Ng conducted the New England Philharmonic Sunday at Tsai Performance Center.

Concerts of the New England Philharmonic have always featured a mix of new and rarely performed works, and a conductor with a flair for both.

But this season has witnessed a transition. Each concert showcased a finalist for the music directorship, left vacant after longtime conductor Richard Pittman suffered [a debilitating stroke \(https://bostonclassicalreview.com/2020/06/conductor-pittman-stricken-leaving-two-boston-ensembles-in-rudderless/\)](https://bostonclassicalreview.com/2020/06/conductor-pittman-stricken-leaving-two-boston-ensembles-in-rudderless/) in March 2020.

Guest conductor Tianhui Ng made a stellar impression on Sunday with a program of Revueltas and Chen Yi, alongside world premieres by Yehudi Wyner and Sofía Rocha.

Ng is comfortable in a wide range of repertoire, having conducted everything from Baroque favorites to the latest scores. His precise gestures drew some of the ensemble's sharpest playing of the season. Yet he projected warmth and excitement in conveying the details of every work to the audience at the Tsai Performance Center on Sunday.

His energy and enthusiasm made Wyner's *Richard Pittman . . . Come Back!* into a moving tribute to the NEP's former conductor.

One of five fanfares performed this season in Pittman's honor, the score wrestles with feelings of loss and grudging acceptance in only three minutes. The music revolves around a jagged theme—a musical depiction of Pittman's name. A sweeping melody in the strings offers short-lived serenity. Woodwinds then engage in a plaintive cry before an epilogue brings it all to a prayerful conclusion. Ng delivered a reading marked by bold contrasts and probing lyricism.

He offered the same advocacy for Sofía Rocha's *Replier*, winner of the NEP's 2020 call for scores. This colorful work is one of stasis and subtle motion. Trills spread about the ensemble one instrument at a time until glissandos land on dark sonorities in the cellos and basses. Gentle crescendos bring a spaciousness to the harmonies that peek out of the texture.



Yet there is a sense of momentum in the work's 14-minute span. Tension builds at a glacial pace, breaking in a playful dialogue between piano and harp. But angst returns in a final collage of dissonance. *Replier* is music at its most elemental, and Ng made a compelling case by drawing attention to every detail.

Chen Yi's *Spring in Dresden* expresses its pent-up energy through a similar musical style. Rocha's teacher at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory, Yi composed this score in 2005 as an homage to post-war Germany as well as traditional Chinese music.

At twenty minutes, this concerto for violin and orchestra is less thematic than gestural. The music unfolds in eerie glissandos and agitated figures passed evenly between soloist and the larger forces. Yet like a mosaic viewed at a distance, the intimate passages create a sense of grandeur. All builds to a climax, where the frenzy evaporates into shimmering sonorities that fade into silence.

Sunday's soloist was NEP concertmaster Danielle Maddon, who found mystery in every dusky flourish. Ng's careful guidance revealed the music's tasteful idiosyncrasies. The accompanying texture coursed and crackled, with the conductor teasing out supple string and wind lines to complement Maddon.

In Revueltas's *La Noche de los Mayas*, Ng painted a vivid scene of indigenous life in the Yucatán. The soundtrack for a 1939 Mexican film, this music treats native rhythms in a harmonic style

reminiscent of Stravinsky and Bartók.

The focus of José Ives Limantour's 1961 arrangement, heard Sunday, is the fourteen percussionists, who weave a polyrhythmic tapestry topped off by wild calls from a conch shell, expertly played by NEP composer-in-residence Eric Nathan.

Ng found an otherworldly splendor in the opening theme. Strings took on bright sonority, while winds and brass made the most of the wailing cries. "Noche de jaranas," with its driving mixed meters, sounded with the zest of a country band. Basses and low brass brought momentary darkness to "Noche de Yucatán." With percussionists fully engaged, Ng and the ensemble rendered "Noche de encantamiento" with festive exuberance.

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