

MUSIC REVIEW

Conductor Tianhui Ng clears a path with the New England Philharmonic

Ng, one of four finalists for the vacant music director position, made a strong bid for the job at Sunday's concert

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 2, 2022, 5:06 p.m.



Music director finalist Tianhui Ng conducts the New England Philharmonic at the Boston University Tsai Performance Center. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Explaining one's own music is "very easy to do badly," said composer Yehudi Wyner at the beginning of the New England Philharmonic's concert on Sunday afternoon. A few

moments later, the orchestra premiered Wyner's new piece, the short but mighty

"Richard Pittman . . . Come Back!", a commission in honor of the orchestra's music director emeritus. Wyner elected to say little else.

Writing music and talking about it are indeed two entirely separate skill sets, and at the concert, neither the Pulitzer Prize-winning veteran Wyner nor the 2020 New England Philharmonic Call for Scores winner Sofia Rocha seemed eager to expound on their pieces when invited to take the mic. No matter: That's not their job as composers. But it's no secret that for many classical listeners who are more accustomed to hearing orchestras play Mozart and Beethoven, 20th- and 21st-century orchestral music (the New England Philharmonic's specialty) can feel inaccessible or intimidating at best, so it's a good idea to have someone on hand who can be the listeners' guide. On Sunday afternoon at the Tsai Performance Center at Boston University, Singapore-born conductor Tianhui Ng, who currently directs several ventures including Boston Opera Collaborative and the Pioneer Valley Symphony, showed he could easily be that someone for the New England Philharmonic.

Take Rocha's piece, "Replier," pronounced "re-plee-AY," after the French, "to refold." In its opening measures, the orchestra essentially undergoes a full body shiver. The concertmaster rapidly cycles between two notes; the next violinist joins in but expands the interval between them; the next one expands it again, and so on until the whole section has been pulled in. In "Replier," Rocha uses shifts in dynamics and orchestral color to create several sonic illusions of closeness. More than once, the piece evoked the feeling of being confronted with something unknowably vast, such as a glacier or the infinite blackness of space. I would hear it again with delight given the opportunity, especially in a space such as Jordan Hall or Symphony Hall that could truly amplify those illusions to their full potential. (Boston Symphony Orchestra and Boston Modern Orchestra Project — remember Rocha's name.)

Yet it was Ng's introductory remarks that leveled up the experience of "Replier" from

It was Ng's introductory remarks that revved up the experience of rehearsal from great to unforgettable. Like director emeritus Pittman and the two music director candidates who took their turns in the past few months, Ng led the orchestra in several snippets of each piece (save Wyner's) while introducing the music. And of the music director candidates so far, his choices of what was most important to preview in each piece struck me as especially helpful. Before Chen Yi's single-movement violin concerto "Spring in Dresden," Ng briefly oriented the audience to the Beijing opera vocal tradition that the composer drew on in writing for the strings, and the swooping vocalizations were palpable in concertmaster Danielle Maddon's delicately steely rendition of the solo. As an audience member, I can say I would have learned to listen to music that struck me as "difficult" much sooner had I known someone like Ng clearing a path through the thicket.

Finally, the suite from Silvestre Revueltas's score to the film "The Night of the Maya" called for showmanship, and Ng and the orchestra delivered with enthusiasm. Before the music began in earnest, the 14-member percussion section demonstrated some of the atypical instruments that joined the orchestra. These included a hollow log drum and a conch shell; the latter was blown by NEP composer-in-residence Eric Nathan, who has a background in trumpet. Even from my seat in the orchestra section, I was easily able to pick out the distinct sounds during the hypnotic revelry of the fourth movement.

The New England Philharmonic planned this season with no intermissions as both a COVID-19 precaution and an attempt to cut down on concert runtime; during the Pittman era, concerts frequently breached the three-hour mark. However, if Ng is selected as music director and intends to include pre-piece explainers (as he should), the orchestra should either put those intermissions back or shorten the programs. Two hours is a long time to sit in one place, whether your chair is on the stage or in the house.

NEW ENGLAND PHILHARMONIC

Tsai Performance Center, May 1. www.nepphilharmonic.org

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