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2016/17 SEASON

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## Review American Youth Symphony and National Children's Chorus members rise to 'Heaven Earth Mankind'



The American Youth Symphony and the National Children's Chorus perform at the Walt Disney Concert Hall on Sunday night. (Pretty Instant)

By Rick Schultz

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Chinese-born composer Tan Dun's "Heaven Earth Mankind (Symphony 1997)," written to celebrate the reunification of Hong Kong with China, is difficult to mount. It's a big-hearted, sprawling journey for players and listeners, requiring a large orchestra and an even larger children's chorus.

It also demands a virtuoso for the solo cello, in the spotlight for most of the score's 67 minutes. Yo-Yo Ma premiered the work, with Tan on the podium, in Hong Kong in 1997.

“ In a sold-out Walt Disney Concert Hall, the American Youth Symphony led by David Alan Miller gave a remarkable performance.”

“ [Coleman] Itzkoff embodied the unifying, exploratory spirit of the piece.”

On Sunday afternoon in a sold-out Walt Disney Concert Hall, the American Youth Symphony led by David Alan Miller gave a remarkable performance of "Heaven Earth Mankind" with more than 150 members of the National Children's Chorus. The featured soloist was Coleman Itzkoff, 24, principal cellist of the youth symphony, an accomplished local training orchestra. He met the work's myriad challenges with astonishing prowess.

Itzkoff embodied the unifying, exploratory spirit of the piece. Even while navigating the score's many technically thorny passages, Itzkoff seemed to be having a good time. His communicative performance was matched by Miller, a former Los Angeles Philharmonic

associate conductor who has been music director of the Albany Symphony in New York since 1992. He perfectly paced the young players, ages 15 to 27, shaping each section of the score with affection and care while maintaining a sense of exuberant spontaneity.

The orchestra includes a huge battery of percussion — gongs and ancient Chinese chime-bells, along with more traditional Western instruments, including timpani and snare drums. In the first section, "Heaven," they embraced the work's formidable demands with winning virtuosity, producing rich-hued sonorities. Ditto the National Children's Chorus, who sounded aptly ethereal. The stirring symphony brasses produced especially warm and golden tones.

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The second section, "Earth," opens with the sounds of a Hong Kong street opera company, a captivating tape made by Tan of a dying tradition. "Earth," a mostly soft John Cage-like concerto for percussion and cello, with enticing flourishes from the woodwinds adding color and texture, showed Itzkoff at his most virtuosic. Playing pizzicato, strumming and tapping his cello, Itzkoff conjured Chinese stringed instruments, like the pipa and ruan, an ancient four-stringed moon-shaped lute. There's also a substantial cadenza for the cellist. The long movement made the biggest demands on the audience, but Miller and the orchestra sustained interest throughout.

An invigorating yell by Miller from the podium got "Mankind" off to a riveting start. But the pace remained pensive until the chorus returned, the children's voices fading, and eventually leading into a jubilant conclusion quoting Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

The concert began with Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Serenade to Music," with the youth symphony and about 35 of the children's chorus conducted by Luke McEndarfer, the group's artistic director. For some reason, the four soloists were situated at the back of the orchestra. They could not be heard enunciating clearly, and it took a few moments to locate where the solo voice was coming from. Soprano Sarah Toutouchian projected the best. The others did well under the circumstances.

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