

Review: A Concerto Makes Two Soloists a Many-Tentacled Creature

[nytimes.com/2023/03/30/arts/music/review-new-york-philharmonic-lara-malkki.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/30/arts/music/review-new-york-philharmonic-lara-malkki.html)

Zachary Woolfe

March 30, 2023



[Continue reading the main story.](#)

Placing an old piece in new surroundings can make you think about it in a fresh way. Until the New York Philharmonic played Charles Ives's short, indelible "[The Unanswered Question](#)" on Wednesday at David Geffen Hall under Susanna Mälkki's baton, I had never thought of it as a tiny double concerto.

It isn't, exactly. A double concerto adds two soloists to the orchestra, and the Ives has five: four flutists and a trumpeter. But its structure — in which soft expanses of consoling strings are the ground for interjections of somber trumpet and bursts of talkative flute — suggests the flutes are a single many-headed unit. It's a kind of double concerto, then, in which two solo forces have a relationship to one another and to the main ensemble.

It's no surprise that my thoughts went to this form. Felipe Lara's sensational Double Concerto, exuberant if not always sunny, had its New York premiere on Wednesday after the Ives.

Written in 2019 and given its premiere in Helsinki under Mälkki two years later, this is a true double concerto, featuring a pair of soloists, Claire Chase and Esperanza Spalding. But this piece, too, complicates the form, since they each use multiple instruments: Chase, a battery

of flutes — another reason the Ives was a wise juxtaposition — and Spalding, a double bass and her bright, pure voice.

[HKO Screen - Felipe Lara: Double Concerto from Helsinki Philharmonic on Vimeo.](#)

Unlike “The Unanswered Question,” which maintains a demure separation between the trumpet (for Ives, representing “the perennial question of existence”) and the flutes (attempts at answers), Lara intertwines his soloists into what Chase calls in a program note “a many-tentacled creature.”

The two often play together, with the trail of one — a whipped breath of flute, a cool curve of voice, a slightly bending reverberation of bass — audible only as a comet’s tail off the joint sound. Neither stops for long over the work’s half-hour length.

Which is not to say that either player is homogenized by combination. The vocabulary here is sprawling and idiosyncratic on both sides. Chase makes virtuosically parched, percussive exhalations; she can be sheerly sweet on the standard flute and has, on the enormous contrabass flute, the milky penetration of a whale’s deep-sea call.

Spalding’s mellow, dancing bass plucks are a sound we know best from jazz, but are totally at home here, and her singing is guileless without being childlike. She mostly vocalizes, sometimes on the syllable “ah,” sometimes on “mm” and sometimes — most memorably at the end — on “shh.” She briefly sings a Portuguese text Lara wrote about life’s blessings, though to listeners that can blur into incantatory vocalizing, too. (From the audience it’s also hard to perceive a secret of the score: Chase is sometimes producing sound by singing into the flute.)

The music is mostly notated, but in a large-scale dual cadenza Chase and Spalding improvise together, remarkably responsive, unified and relaxed, creating a miniature universe of sounds — whispery, earthy, otherworldly-woozy, underwater-translucent, simple and raucous: a paean to the joy of collaboration, of play.

The orchestra, led by Mälkki with focused confidence on Wednesday, tends to be active but subdued, the way you can perceive seething activity even in a seemingly still jungle. There are hazy effusions of brass; little thickets of rattling, shivering percussion; and whooshing, glistening strings that were a textural link to the Ives, as well as to Stravinsky’s “Petrushka,” which came after intermission.

Performed in the pared-down orchestration Stravinsky made in 1947, decades after writing the piece, “Petrushka” here seemed both to echo and to have generated the Lara concerto’s off-kilter abruptness, fearless colors and wry enigmas.

The Philharmonic, sounding poised throughout the concert, was especially evocative in Stravinsky's humid third tableau. Alison Fierst brought nuance and a sense of mystery to her crucial solo on, yes, the flute. (The instrument could hardly get a more profound showcase than this program.) Under Mälkki, "Petrushka," more than any other quality, had unexpected intimacy.

As did Lara's concerto. Even as it builds to flourishes of gleaming Hollywood-golden-age grandeur, and even with substantial forces — there are two full string sections onstage, one tuned slightly higher than the other — Lara has the maturity to resist doing too much.

He also has the skill to shape a gorgeously varied but unbroken single movement that evolves organically over its 30 minutes to a final lullaby, pricked by starry harp. This is a complex but legible, lovable piece; a funky yet elegant ritual; thrilling and taut, if also fundamentally unhurried and unpressured.

Spalding performed in a jumpsuit printed, in bold capital letters, with "LIFE FORCE," and I felt that way about the music, too.

New York Philharmonic

This program is repeated through Friday at David Geffen Hall, Manhattan; nyphil.org.