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Concert: San Francisco Symphony

By TIM PAGE

THE San Francisco Symphony, under the direction of its new music director, Herbert Blomstedt, played an uncommonly well-balanced program at Carnegie Hall Sunday night. In contrast to many visiting orchestras — who present the occasional rarity at home but trot out only the most familiar works in the repertory during New York visits — the San Francisco Symphony offered a largely unfamiliar masterpiece, "Tapiola," by Jean Sibelius; the first local performance of a challenging new work by the American composer Charles Wuorinen, "Movers and Shakers," and, finally, one of the few warhorses of which it is difficult to grow tired, Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in A (Op. 92).

"Tapiola" began the program. This 20-minute tone poem, a musical evocation of the vast, unpeopled forests of the Finnish northlands, was the composer's last major work and, 60 years after its premiere, it retains an eerie power. It is pictorial music — a musical still life, of sorts — but hardly colorful: with its harmonic stasis and gray timbres, "Tapiola" is characterized by a bleak, poetic desolation, a mood broken only by the blistering depiction of a Northern windstorm in the last minutes of the piece.

Despite some hesitant attacks, Mr. Blomstedt and his forces delivered a vivid "Tapiola." The string sound

was full and rich, yet without any undue lushness that might compromise the composer's vision. The winds and brass alternately snarled and soothed over the thunder of the percussion; time stood appropriately still: Mr. Blomstedt led with spare, economical gestures. Orchestra and conductor seemed united in a quest for Sibelius.

And of all the century's great composers, Sibelius is probably the least understood. The reasons for this are obvious: unlike Schoenberg and Stravinsky, he founded no school, offered no formulas. Because his idiom combined Romanticism and neo-Classicism in such a personal manner, it was impossible for young composers to imitate. And, finally, he was an uneven composer who churned out a lot of trivial little pieces side by side with the masterly symphonies (his piano music, for example, is shockingly bad). We have a native suspicion of geniuses who take an afternoon off.

Still, 60 years after he stopped composing, Sibelius is an important influence on composers as diverse as John Adams, Ingram Marshall, Peter Maxwell Davies and, on the evidence of some recent works like "Prelude to Kullervo," Mr. Wuorinen.

"Movers and Shakers" is Sibelian only in its grandeur. Mr. Wuorinen, during an interview quoted in Michael Steinberg's program notes, recently observed that he had suc-

ceeded in curbing his "tendency to bang and crash." Not entirely — there are bangs and crashes aplenty, the piano part is aggressively percussive, and the entire score is punctuated by icy interpolations from the mallet instruments.

One admired Mr. Blomstedt's decision to play a new work that was *not* a premiere. It has become customary to commission a work, play it once and then relegate it to the scrap heap; the American composer Ralph Shapey once proposed a "Society for Second Performances."

Mr. Wuorinen has been and remains an articulate advocate of 12-tone composition, but his actual, sounding esthetic has changed. His music used to be chilly and desiccated, a hothouse product, wearing its dissonance as a spiky shield to dissuade all comers. Mr. Wuorinen's harmonic language is still uncompromising, but "Movers and Shakers" has passages of aching lyricism, and many moments of sheer, visceral excitement. This is a big, bustling work, teeming with energy and intelligence.

After such a challenging first half of the program, one slipped into Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 as into a comfortable bath. Mr. Blomstedt led a performance that began rather cautiously, with a slow, measured tempo in the first movement that seemed artificially restrained, and moved steadily toward the Dionysian effusion of the final Allegro con Brio.