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Brooklyn Philharmonic Pays Tribute to Harriet Tubman in 'Freedom'

By ALLAN KOZINN

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Richard Termine for The New York Times
Chelsea Tipton II conducts the Brooklyn Philharmonic.

The Brooklyn Philharmonic closed its season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Saturday with a contemporary-music program called "Freedom!" The title was taken from the opening chorus of Thea Musgrave's "Remembering Harriet," a tribute to Harriet Tubman drawn from Ms. Musgrave's 1985 opera, "Harriet, the Woman Called Moses." The second half of the concert was devoted to "Remembering Harriet," though the title's application to the first half was nominal at best.

The opening work, Daniel Bernard Roumain's "Hip-Hop Essay," might be heard as a celebration of freedom from stylistic constraint. And perhaps the same can be said of Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 1, which moves between the symphonic and the theatrical in much the same way that Mr. Roumain's piece melds purely symphonic moves with the sharp, insistent rhythms of hip-hop. The text of the

Bernstein work — Jeremiah's description of Jerusalem, desolate after its destruction by the Babylonians — is less about freedom than about the loss of it.

Even so, the three scores worked well together. Mr. Roumain's score, commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra in 1997, presents unusual challenges, not least the need to balance the omnipresent and assertive percussion against the rest of the orchestra. Chelsea Tipton II, on loan from the Toledo Symphony, where he is resident conductor, deftly led the orchestra through the score's brash textures and complicated cross-rhythms and kept the ensemble tightly unified.

He did as much for the Bernstein, which has the benefit of lush string writing and tart brass and woodwind figures, creating an ominous atmosphere in its opening pages, but the piece veers oddly toward bright theatricality toward the end of the first movement. Its more wrenching finale benefited from Pamela Dillard's rich, graceful mezzo-soprano and dignified phrasing.

Ms. Musgrave's work is an effective advertisement for her opera about Tubman and the Underground Railroad. The arias, ensembles and choruses, linked here by a concise narration, are dramatic and emotional, and the story, with its episodes of abuse, flight, rescue and pursuit, is eminently stageworthy. Ms. Musgrave ties it all together with an appealingly warm, eclectic score that occasionally quotes from spirituals. (One of Harriet's arias is built around "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.")

Cynthia Haymon, the soprano, gave well-shaped, passionate readings of Harriet's music, with Ms. Dillard as Rit, Tubman's mother, and Nmon Ford, a baritone with a deep, resonant timbre, as Harriet's friend Josiah. The narrator was Vinson Cole.