

Arts & Entertainment

MUSIC REVIEW

'Lincolniana' a must-hear any year

Lincoln examined through eclectic fusion of genres

By Howard Reich
TRIBUNE CRITIC

The Lincoln Bicentennial won't occur until February, but a major new work evoking the struggles and triumphs of the 16th president arrived early at the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park.

Sunday evening's world premiere of "Lincolniana," by the genre-defying Chicago composer Elbio Barilari, set heady goals for itself. By incorporating texts of Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman, the piece aspired to the loftiest realms of American letters. And by drawing upon jazz, classical and folkloric music, "Lincolniana" attempted to encompass a vast swath of the American experience.

Further performances will clarify the value of the work, but on first hearing, it emerged as an arrestingly effective suite, albeit one deeply indebted to Aaron Copland's "Lincoln Portrait."

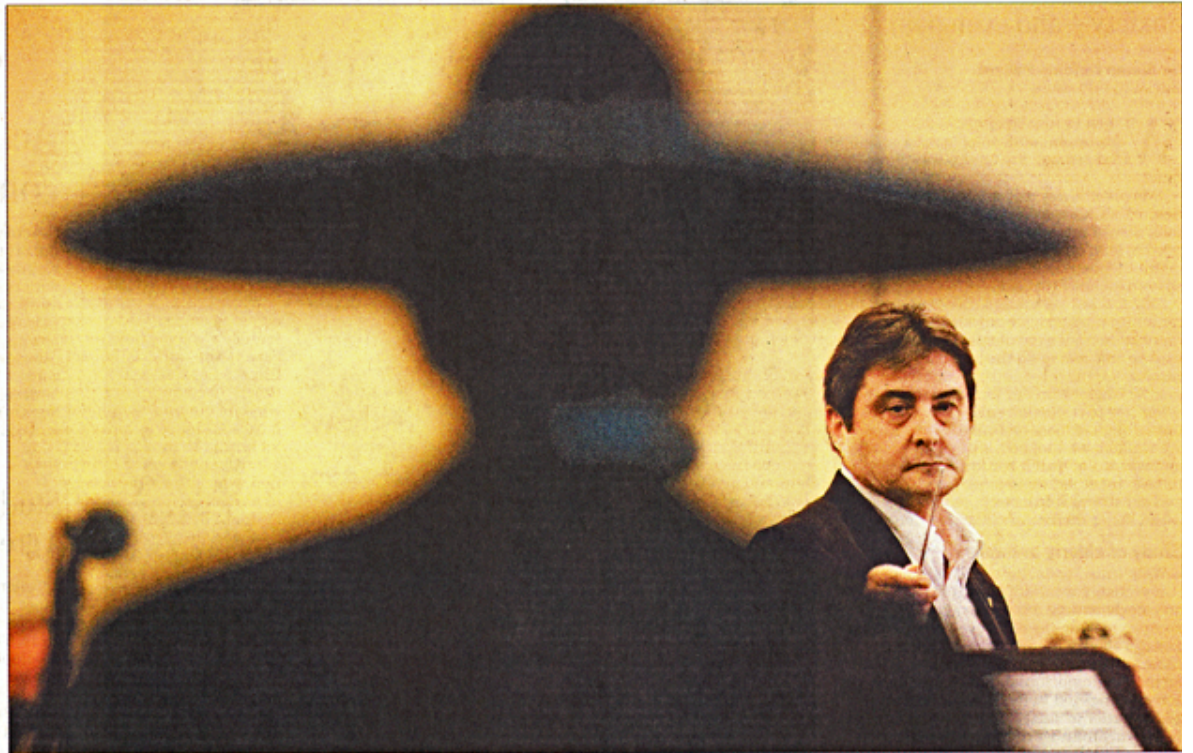
Like that musical landmark, "Lincolniana" sought to capture the spirit of the man and the tenor of his times through rhetorical oration and stirring musical interludes. But where "Lincoln Portrait"—for all its nobility—can veer into bombast (particularly when dispatched by a leather-lunged narrator), "Lincolniana" brought its revered subject off his pedestal and onto a more human footing.

This achievement owed mostly to the nature of Barilari's score, which cunningly fused jazz rhythm, classical harmony and—brace yourself—Mexican mariachi music.

The third might seem improbable, except that portions of the work examined Lincoln's simpatico relationship with Mexican President Benito Juarez.

In hands less capable than Barilari's, the results might have been an unfortunate pastiche of conflicting genres and cultures.

Instead, "Lincolniana" unfolded almost seamlessly, its three movements tracing the staggering challenges Lincoln faced, the tragic



Elbio Barilari conducts the Ondas Ensemble, including Juan Rivera (in sombrero) during Lawn of Lincoln Day at Ravinia Festival in Highland Park.

price he paid and the immutable ways in which he transformed a nation.

To give the piece focus, Barilari ingeniously structured the piece not as a symphonic tone poem but, rather, as something closely resembling a jazz concerto for trumpet and chamber orchestra (plus narration).

So despite its soaring poetry, with excerpts from Sandburg's "The People, Yes" and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "Lincolniana" for the most part progressed as a dialogue between jazz trumpet and instrumentalists.

To hear trumpet virtuoso Orbert Davis producing the laments of the first movement and the blues-

tinged elegy of the last was to behold the jazz currents coursing through this music. Jazz itself owes a debt to Lincoln, the work seemed to be saying, a point underscored by the urgent swing rhythms and bent-note melodies that drove "Lincolniana."

And when Juan Rivera sang in Spanish of Presidents Lincoln and Juarez, accompanying himself on guitar in mariachi style, there was no doubt that this piece maintained a populist spirit at its core.

The piece, broadcast live on WFMT-FM 98.7, deserves to be heard again, and often, as the Lincoln Bicentennial approaches.

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Chicago jazz trumpeter Orbert Davis plays during the performance, which featured readings from poets Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman.