

JAZZ REVIEW

A poetic jazz tribute to Obama

By Howard Reich
TRIBUNE CRITIC

The Obama administration wasn't yet one day old when Chicago heard the first major musical work honoring the new president.

Playing for a standing-room-only audience, nearly 20 of the city's top jazz musicians took the stage of the Morse Theatre on Tuesday night to perform "Sounds of Hope," an epic suite that lived up to its name, in literal ways.

For starters, the four movements were linked by texts riffing on the word "hope," from Aristotle to Barack Obama. As vocalist Dee Alexander chanted Emily Dickinson—half speaking, half singing—the instrumentalists improvised softly, producing a haze of ambient sounds.

When the random musical

phrases finally cohered into "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" (or at least hinted at that spiritual), there was no doubt that "Sounds of Hope" would deal with roots of the black experience in America, building toward Obama's inauguration as president.

But because the piece was jointly created by composer Elbio Barilari and percussionist-bandleader Kahil El'Zabar, "Sounds of Hope" ran the risk of emerging as a homogenized piece without a distinct point of view. How could two such different artists really forge a single musical perspective?

The answer, of course, lay not so much in what the composers put on paper but on what their musicians improvised in response to it. These instrumentalists, after all, are adept at collective improvisation, in which they invent music en

masse, on the spot.

The sounds the players produced at the Morse offered moments of high lyric poetry and rough-and-tumble dissonance, sleek orchestral writing and nearly chaotic big-band improv.

A classical composer with a sensitivity for jazz, Barilari presided over an opening movement that often evoked the orchestral works of Duke Ellington. If the surging ensemble passages expressed the radiance of Barilari's score, the scorching jazz solos by trumpeter Corey Wilkes and others attested to the inspiration of the moment.

El'Zabar long has been a virtuoso of what he calls "spontaneous conduction," in which his chanted phrases and galvanic body language communicate what the instrumentalists are to play. Not surprisingly, the passages he led



Kahil El'Zabar (left) directs "Sounds of Hope." E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE

were less detailed and preordained than Barilari's but just as explosive, if not more so. When the band finally launched into an exultant, five-note theme that all but shouted

"Ba-rack O-ba-ma," it was clear that the suite—and the country—had reached a pinnacle.

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