

MUSIC REVIEW

Future in good musical hands

Idyllwild Arts' talented young artists give a spirited performance.

By MARK SWED
Times Staff Writer

Last week in Massachusetts, students at the Tanglewood Music Center, the nation's most prestigious summer training program for young musicians, participated in the world premieres of new operas by Osvaldo Golijov and Robert Zuidam. If there were problems with these productions, that had nothing to do with the kids. They were great, and I left Tanglewood feeling pretty good about the future of classical music.

On Sunday night, after a performance at Royce Hall by the festival chorus, orchestra and chamber orchestra from Idyllwild Arts, my sanguine attitude had become total optimism. The summer program of the San Jacinto Mountains arts academy

may not have quite the profile of Tanglewood, Marlboro or Aspen, but that is all the more reason for celebration. What Sunday's spirited, persuasive and immensely enjoyable performance confirmed is that the level of enthusiastic young talent runs deep.

As the concert began, the orchestra assembled for Gustav Holst's "The Planets" was so large that it took up every inch of stage; the women's chorus for the mystical last movement, "Neptune," was also large and was placed on the balcony. The USC conductor, Larry Livingston, gave the student players — who ranged in age from 14 to 28 and who came from 18 countries — their heads. They were loud and excitable; the rhythms of "Mars" were the thrilling drum-beat of war before the reality of battle sinks in. Conducting without a score, Livingston kept them treading a thrilling fine line that may have come close to but never shaded into bombast.

More notable was the West Coast premiere of Michael

Torke's "Book of Proverbs." This wonderful 1996 score for chorus, two vocal soloists and chamber orchestra by a young American composer probably should have given a reviewer a moment's pause. It ends with music of glorious bloom, the chorus singing: "Boast not of tomorrow, for you know not what any day may bring forth." Yet the exhilarating music and performance, brilliantly conducted by the Los Angeles Master Chorale's music director, Grant Gershon, did nothing but boast of tomorrow.

For young performers, this is spunky, provocative music. Torke sets biblical proverbs in a ricocheting style that mimics the propulsive beat of pop music but is more satisfyingly complex. Perky melodies never quite go where you expect them to as they break apart and are put back together again. The spirit runs high, and the smiles provided are many. A chorus of high-schoolers was not defeated by the irrepressible instrumentalists, although under these circumstances, the two emerging professional soloists — the radiant soprano Elissa Johnston and the eloquent baritone Nmon Ford — could have used a bit of amplification.

Not everything went right. A second intermission before Livingston returned for the "Der Rosenkavalier" suite meant that the long concert ran three hours — and lost two-thirds of its animated audience. That seemed a cruel outcome for these budding musicians. But maybe it was just as well, given that the opening music to Richard Strauss' opera is among the most sexually suggestive in the standard repertory, and there were a lot of parents in the crowd. Still, if classical fare is to compete with pop culture, maybe a little illicit late-night sex in the city isn't the worst thing.

And those who left early missed something. One might have expected to hear an orchestra of intemperate Octavians — like the impulsive, inexperienced young lover of an older woman in "Der Rosenkavalier." In fact, the ensemble was strikingly competent, so much so that Livingston, again conducting from memory, could indulge in broad, effusive gestures and still keep a high level of discipline. No apologies needed to be made for the playing. It was beautiful.