

Del Tredici's Alice score raises roof at Cleveland Institute of Music

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Courtesy of Cleveland Institute of Music/Leigh-Anne 75th birthday of American composer David Del Tredici, shown during a symposium this week at the Cleveland Institute of Music, was marked Wednesday by the CIM New Music Ensemble.

Who would have thought that dear little Alice – you remember, the girl who finds herself in Wonderland – would rival Brunnhilde in Wagner's "Götterdämmerung"?

In the nearly dozen works he composed based on Lewis Carroll's Alice tales, David Del Tredici wrote enough music to equal the six hours it takes for Wagnerian mortals, dwarfs and gods to destroy their world.

Among these Del Tredici scores is "In Memory of a Summer Day," the first of four parts that comprise an evening-long work, "Child Alice." The Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra performed Part I on Wednesday as part of its New Music Series to celebrate the American composer's 75th birthday, which is March 16.

Del Tredici spent four days at CIM this week meeting with composition students and attending rehearsals for "In Memory of a Summer Day," which he said, in a breezy "overture" (speech) preceding Wednesday's concert, had never been better prepared.

There's little need to believe otherwise, given the stupendous account of the score the students delivered under the scrupulous baton of Steven Smith. For sheer, clamorous excitement, the performance was

something else – far too much for modest Kulas Hall to handle (ear plugs should have been handed out at the door), but also a wondrous immersion into Del Tredici's explosive imagination.

The composer took some heat from colleagues and critics three decades ago for forgoing modernist complexity and adopting a tonal, neo-romantic style of writing. Andrew Porter, in a *New Yorker* review of "Child Alice" in 1986, called the piece "simple-minded," as well as "self-indulgent, uncontrolled, orgiastic."

Maybe, but it sounds exhilarating today. In the "Alice" cycle, Del Tredici channels his inner Wagner-Strauss-Mahler to whip up orchestral extravagance of guilty-pleasure euphoria.

The catchy Alice theme that weaves its way through the six sections of "In Memory of a Summer Day" undergoes numerous transformations, from whispers to paint-peeling screams. Amid the instrumental luxuriance, an amplified soprano sings "simple" and "ecstatic" versions of the poem Carroll wrote to preface two Alice books.

The high writing for soprano is taxing to the point of cruelty, and the grandiose orchestra often swallows text and singer whole. But CIM faculty member Jung Eun Oh was fearless in the face of the stratospheric challenges, floating lines with impressive radiance and assurance.

Smith and the orchestra reveled in the colors and effects with which Del Tredici depicts this memorable summer day. Every section made sensitive and forceful contributions, and the various soloists were distinguished.

And it was no surprise that Del Tredici looked overjoyed when he came onstage at the end. CIM had just given him the best birthday present a composer could desire.