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ASO closes season with heart, Mozart

By **Pierre Ruhe**
For the AJC

Concert review
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

8 tonight. Symphony Hall, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 404-733-5000, www.atlantasymphony.org.

It's a beautiful thing when the highlights of the classical season are contemporary works.

Last week's Atlanta Symphony Orchestra concerts included two world premieres by American composers – Jennifer Higdon and Michael Gandolfi – whose extroverted music speaks directly, candidly, to a broad audience. This week's ASO program, closing its 65th season, features an American composer of different inclinations. Peter Lieberson's "Neruda Songs" – elliptical, achingly lyrical and deeply emotional – come with the most wrenching narrative in classical music today.

The composer set five poems from the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's collection "100 Love Sonnets" and fashioned them, in the original Spanish, into a sort of story line for his wife, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, who sang the premiere in 2005 and died, from breast cancer, a year later.

Robert Spano conducted Hunt Lieberson in the "Neruda Songs" in Cleveland at the end of 2005. He returned to them Thursday in Symphony Hall with the ASO and Kelley O'Connor, a charismatic young mezzo.

In the opening song, sultry and languid and translated as "If your eyes were not the color of the moon," O'Connor hung on phrases with disarming poignancy.

Lieberson is a reformed atonalist – the sort of modernism that's now all but banished from American concert halls – and it was only after he met Lorraine Hunt that he let down his intellectual defenses and started writing emotionally direct music. "Probably my earlier pieces were more about testosterone," Lieberson said. "Then I found love, and that's what you're hearing now in my music."

It's an idea that Spano and the ASO exploited by placing Lieberson between Mozart's final two symphonies. Their reading of Symphony No. 40, to open the evening, felt underprepared.

But at concert's end, Symphony No. 41, burst with vitality and ideas and orchestral cohesion.

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