

CLASSICAL REVIEW | PROJECT COPERNICUS

Project Copernicus freshens familiar works **Project Copernicus debuted Saturday and, like its namesake astronomer, the ensemble changed our perception -- by performing music in a fresh context.**

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One has barely been able to take a step in South Florida the past two seasons without tripping over a new chamber orchestra. Those likely to survive are the ensembles capable of attracting audiences with distinctive programs and high-quality performances.

Project Copernicus seems poised to meet those standards. Founded by conductor Chung Park and composer Stephen Danyew, the group made its debut Saturday night to a large, appreciative audience at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Kendall.

Taking its name from the 16th century Polish astronomer who gave the sun its due, the group has a mission to "realign the musical paradigm" as Copernicus did our perception of the heavens. Rather than serving up standards in the usual way, Project Copernicus is committed to performing contemporary music as well as familiar works in a fresh context.

Its opening program certainly fit the bill, offering Danyew's music as well as orchestral works of Debussy and Mahler retooled for chamber ensemble.

Among them was Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 4* as arranged by Arnold Schoenberg's assistant, Erwin Stein, who did an extraordinary job in his version for 12 players. There is no brass, but with string quintet, much doubling by the three wind players and piano, harmonium and percussion, hardly a note is lost.

Some passages actually emerge more effective in Stein's scaled-down version. The rustic irony and Viennese qualities are much more pungent throughout, with the harmonium adding an aptly creepy touch. The sardonic edge of the second movement comes across with greater bite, and the vocal finale seems less inflated and more balanced.

Perched on a high stool, Park led an alert, well-paced performance underlining the grotesquerie but drawing out Mahler's lyrical nostalgia with rich, idiomatic expression.

There were several rough spots, with repeated violin mishaps and one jarring loss of ensemble in the first movement. Still, this transparent chamber version leaves nowhere to hide, and, for a debut concert, the solid, conscientious playing conveyed Mahler's music eloquently.

Soprano Monica Yunus' youthful timbre suited the child's view of heaven finale, and the coda had just the right sense of glowing solace.

Also heard was Danyew's *Soft Wind*. A concise, deeply felt work dedicated to his late grandfather, it's a lovely, lyrical tribute, with Yunus and tenor Brandon McReynolds providing ardent singing of Danyew's own text.

The concert began with Schoenberg's chamber transcription of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. Park led a lucid, refined reading with elegant flute playing by Ebonee Thomas.

Lawrence A. Johnson is The Miami Herald's classical music critic.