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Fresh taste, stealthy wallop

New music, symphonic sleepers fill 2014-'15 LSO season

by Lawrence Cosentino



"Fresh, but not raw" should be the label for the 2014-'15 Lansing Symphony season.

Maestro Timothy Muffitt will disperse a generous portion of 21st century music along with classics from lofg deceased souls such as Beethoven, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Mozart and Elgar. But the new stuff is all on the gentle side.

The two big highlights are the world premiere of a folksy piano concerto by Grammy-winning composer Robert Aldridge, with the composer on hand to midwife the birth (May 15, 2015) and a meditative epic by MSU-based composer Marjan Helms featuring charismatic LSO principal flutist Richard Sherman (March 7). The sparkling "Musica Celestis" by Aaron Jay Kernis (Oct. 11) and a snippet of Michael Gandolfi's epic "Garden of Cosmic Speculation" (Sept. 12), both of who are still breathing air, are also on the slate.

The newer stuff flows strictly from the well of lyricism and melody, with no firewater like last year's wild Donald Erb

trombone concerto.

Muffitt wants to roll with the energy of this year's season closer, when the melodic intensity and major-key wham of "Rainbow Body," written in 2000 by Christopher Theofanidis, provoked a spontaneous midconcert standing ovation.

"It was so great to create that kind of a powerful bond with an audience with music from a living American composer," Muffitt said.

Muffitt admits (if you pin him down) that he is most excited about bringing Lansing the world premiere of a new piano concerto by Aldridge, one of America's most celebrated composers. Aldridge's opera "Elmer Gantry" won the 2012 Grammy for best contemporary classical composition and was dubbed "an operatic miracle" by The New York Times. Young pianist Melissa Marse, a specialist in Aldridge's strong and sweet Americana, will be the soloist for the concerto, provisionally dubbed "Variations on a Folk Tune for Piano and Orchestra." The leonine, larger-than-life Aldridge will be on hand for the whole process.

"Giving birth to a very significant piece of music of the 21st century American canon is a big event for Lansing," Muffitt said.

The other big new-music event at the LSO next season springs from the cranium of Marjan Helms, composer and piano instructor at MSU's Community Music School. Helms is working closely with Sherman on "Seven Ascents for Flute and Orchestra," a probing and lyrical work that runs some 45 minutes, written especially to suit Sherman's soulful, mercurial style. Sherman played the work with some rough-around-the-edges support from the Jackson Symphony last week, but composer and flutist are eager to bring their collaboration home to Lansing audience next season.

The 2014-'15 season's strong slate of soloists, all on the younger side, also fits the "fresh, not raw" theme. The biggest catch is arguably young Russian-American violinist Yevgeny Kutik, glowingly profiled in The New York Times in March and headed for big things. He'll get plenty of room to strut his stuff with Max Bruch's über-Romantic violin concerto at the season opener Sept. 12.

Muffitt was deeply impressed with Melissa Marse, soloist for the May 15 Aldridge premiere, when they worked together last year on a thorny Bartok piano concerto. "Wow," Muffitt said. "You could have taken that performance anywhere."

When Muffitt teamed with 19-year-old pianist Colton Peltier for a Baton Rouge Symphony concert two years ago, the audience went nuts over his "unassuming confidence" (in Muffitt's description) and the maestro brought him back for another night. Peltier will debut in Lansing with the Chopin concerto Oct. 11. Texas-based Bion Tsang, a Rhodes Scholar and one of the nation's top cellists, will play Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations Jan. 10. (Tsang was born in Lansing, but he moved to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., when he was 6 weeks old.)

The other big theme of the LSO's 2014-'15 season is "stealth power." The year's big pieces, with one or two exceptions, conceal their wallop.

"This season, to me, has a slightly different feel than other seasons," Muffitt said. "When we say we're doing a Mahler symphony, everybody knows what kind of blowout that's going to be. This time we're taking a look at the power that lies within pieces that don't come across as overtly powerful."

Muffitt puts Felix Mendelssohn's Fourth Symphony and the Chopin piano concerto (Oct. 11) in that box, along with Beethoven's Sixth (Jan. 10) and Bruch's violin concerto (Sept. 12). The British-empire majesty of Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations" (March 7) doesn't really fit the profile, but you can argue the point over a bottle of stout.

That leaves the Russians, who can't seem to play well with others. Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony (Sept. 12) and Stravinsky's "Firebird" (May 15) are wild runaway troikas (or is it nukes?) and don't fit the stealth profile, either.

"We still have the big and flashy in there, too," Muffitt admitted.

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