

Icarus falling — and rising

Lansing Symphony falters with Kernis, flies with Mendelssohn

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

The days begin with tender beams of light, but few evenings behave that way. Thanks to Lansing Symphony maestro Timothy Muffitt's taste for substantial, unusual curtain-raisers, Saturday night's opener felt like a celestial wake-up call.

Review

"Musica Celestis" ("Music of the Heavens") by New York composer Aaron Jay Kernis was an ethereal summons to meditation, even if the performance didn't quite live up to the music's high demands.

Scored for strings only, the work blends Copland-esque American elegies with shimmering clusters of sustained high notes. At the height of a high-strung emotional arc, the music pushes toward a state of synesthesia, where vision and hearing merge. I began to imagine I could see colors in the chords and mentally reached for an ear visor, like the one in my car, to keep from looking directly at the high notes.

The orchestra rode the arc beautifully, for the most part, but slips in intonation marred the crystal at crucial moments. The highs just didn't have the unity and clarity needed to pull off the blinding climax. I thought of Icarus flying too close to the sun, but the problem wasn't hubris, just under-rehearsal of some obviously demanding music. Kudos, anyway, to Muffitt and the orchestra for putting on the wings in the first place and starting the night with something different instead of an overture we've heard a million times.

The opening huffs of the night's biggest work, Chopin's first piano concerto, aroused my worst fears of stuffed-shirt, starched-collar symphonic music, especially after the luminous Kernis. But it was only a setup. The orchestral part of the concerto is dull and by-the-book, to be sure, but what do you expect from piano-centric Chopin? Let loose in this generic symphonic landscape, guest soloist Colton Peltier had a full 40 minutes to romp like a golden retriever, and he was a joy to watch and hear.

The best thing about Peltier was his relaxed, assured flow. He avoided extremes of sound and emotion. He didn't bang the keys or fling his head back. That's not to say he was boring — far from it. There was nothing programmed or robotic about him. He just seemed to be enjoying himself.

The lopsided roles of orchestra and soloist made Peltier's youth (he's only 20 years old) even more of an asset. Every time the orchestra started to thunder like a parent laying down the law, Peltier eased in, brushed off the bluster and calmly took care of business, as if to say, "Chill, I got this."

The Chopin was absorbing, but a strange and wondrous thing happened about halfway



Rachel Santorelli

Piano soloist Colton Peltier joined the Lansing Symphony for its MasterWorks 2 performance last weekend.

through the first movement of the last work on the program, Felix Mendelssohn's "Italian" symphony. For no apparent reason, the concert really took wing. A pleasant but workmanlike evening of music became an exhilarating one.

The dynamic, fluid genius of Mendelssohn might have goosed the orchestra a bit, but I'd love to know what really happened. Did Muffitt nail a gold coin to the mast, like Captain Ahab in "Moby Dick," or what?

Gone were the imbalances, hesitations, intonation slips and timing glitches that cropped up in the first half of the evening. Mendelssohn's high-energy rhythms and triple-rich textures rippled through the air with pageantry, majesty and a grand sense of fun.

For the rest of the night, the orchestra zoomed along in the zone of zero resistance, as if they had soaked up some weird physics from the superconducting cyclotron across the street from the Wharton Center.

The second movement pulled back to a hushed, devotional mood (more Russian than Italian to my ears), anchored by a wall-to-wall walking bass figure, sure and steady as a pendulum. The third-movement minuet, with its noble little horn fanfare, was the quintessence of elegance.

Muffitt launched the final movement, a sprite-y-flighty cousin to Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream," at a breath-takingly quick pace, but all hands rode the vibrations as if they were born with gossamer wings. Mendelssohn loves to put a fragile capsule of joy on a Saturn V thruster of ceremonial weight, start the ignition and see what happens. Saturday's performance rode that rocket all the way to the moon. No Icarus syndrome here. A few weeks from now, when the recording of this performance pops up on WKAR radio, some motorists will sit in the parking lot until the last note. When the announcer reveals that it was the Lansing Symphony, they'll say, "Wow."

It wouldn't be the first time.

gs." Like the "Ada- bring the night to a close."