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Delicate work

Lansing Symphony and Richard Sherman bring ethereal new epic to life

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

Something out of the ordinary happened about half-way through "Seven Ascents for Flute and Orchestra," one of two major works the Lansing Symphony Orchestra played Saturday night. An invisible, wet finger descended from the skies, poked through the brick walls of the Wharton Center's Cobb Great Hall and gently stroked the rim of the orchestra, as if it were a giant wine glass.

Overtone radiated in layers of darkness and light. Piano plinks merged with soft violin tremors, iced by the glassy sound of a bow being drawn across a vibraphone. The crystalline ascent climaxed with a bright burst of brass and an impossibly clear, high note from soloist Richard Sherman's flute.

It was mysterious music, but the occasion for it was no mystery. The wet finger on the glass was that of Marjan Helms, an MSU-based composer with a meticulous orchestral brush, a meditative bent and an unabashed love of melody.

In a once-in-a-blue-moon twofer, the symphony gave Helms a rare showcase for a living and local composer, paired with an extended, astonishing solo turn by one of the home team's most dynamic and fiery musicians.

Review

This was delicate work for musicians and listeners alike. The blasts, bluster and bravura that inflate most orchestral evenings were of no use here. Instead, Helms sent Sherman and the orchestra on an epic, 47-minute quest through a sparse desert valley where sensual beauty and philosophical inquiry converge.

Reacting to the soundscapes around him, Sherman poured out a series of soliloquies that suggested an extended quest for beauty, truth or both.

At first, Sherman was a man on a purposeful walk, singing his song as he passed through the orchestral hills and valleys.

Gradually, the world darkened around him. Rumbles in the basses, percussion skitterings and cryptic woodwind outbursts hemmed him in from all sides.

Helms' music melds easily in your mind to form impressions both visual and metaphysical. It was easy to picture the walking man with the flute entering a valley of scorpions and bats — or facing his own darkest impulses.

With its vaguely Native American tropes, intermittent John Williams swoops and pools of honeyed song, the music constantly skirted the verge of postmodern banality, but never fell in.

Sherman played so passionately and precisely that his

utterances came as close to audible thought as music can get.

Toward the end, he let himself go with an exuberant, jig-like outburst that seemed to change the orchestral world around him. (He was so earnest about it that the jarring intrusion of kitschy Irishness could be chalked up to his essential I-wanna-be-me-ness, and was soon spent anyway.)

After all that questing in the desert, a revelation swirled up like a column of sunlit earth. You can't change reality, but if you put yourself out there and sing your song, reality will not only take care of itself, it may even sing back. Why else would the horns shift from martial to celebratory, or the percussion stop skittering and start celebrating, in response?

The beauty of "Seven Ascents" was that you could take your choice: buy into all that subtext or just sit back and listen to the music of the crystal spheres. A piece so deliberate, thoughtful and lengthy couldn't have been to everyone's taste, but the audience stayed dead quiet and seemed engaged for the duration. Chalk up a lot of that attentiveness to the breathtaking level of engagement from Muffitt, the orchestra and Sherman. Few performances in recent years have so seamlessly combined attention to detail with irresistible flow.

The night's other big work, Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations," was ostensibly chosen for contrast, being so British and blustery and all.

But Saturday's performance wasn't a simple quiet-cop-loud-cop work-over. "Enigma Variations" has more ambivalence, melancholy and mystery than most people remember from its most famous bits. In Muffitt's hands, the music swelled and receded with a deep, natural breath. Maybe it was the afterglow of "Seven Ascents," but even Elgar's British bluster came off like a grand assertion of his life force, an ascent in bushy mustache and bowler hat.