

# Lansing orchestra pushes envelope on folk music

By Ken Glickman  
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On Friday night, once again, the Lansing Symphony Orchestra is proving that it's a groundbreaking musical institution.

While orchestras throughout the U.S. lose audience because they only play the old standards over and over again, the LSO is constantly searching for new and exciting music to ignite its listeners.

For last month's concert, Muffitt treated us to a sumptuous new flute concerto by local composer Marjan Helms. For Friday's concert, Muffitt is pushing the envelope once again.

The LSO is premiering a new piece called "Variations on a Folk Tune for Piano and Orchestra" by Robert Aldridge. Knowing that most theme and variations pieces are

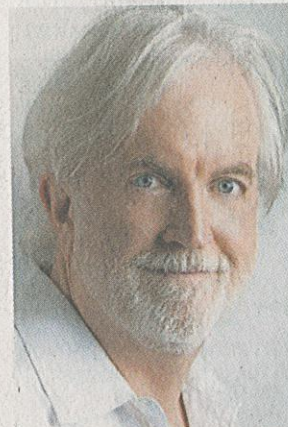
based on melodies written by other composers, when Muffitt first read the score he asked Aldridge, "Where'd you get the folk tune from?"

Aldridge responded, "I wrote it."

Everything about this performance is fresh and unique. First off, one could rightfully call this work Aldridge's "love child." In today's classical music landscape, new music is almost always written on a commission by an orchestra, non-profit or an individual.

Aldridge, who is a Grammy award winning (both for his opera "Elmer Gantry") composer said, "This is not a commission – it's a labor of love. I was writing a new piece for someone else, and this melody came into my head. Off and on, I've been working on it for five years."

After he finished it, sort of (more about that



COURTESY PHOTO

Robert Aldridge

later), the new piece languished in his drawer for a while.

Then came a conversation with pianist Melissa Marse. Aldridge and Marse have been friends since they were both students at Yale School of Music – he was getting a doctorate in composition and she was

getting a masters in piano-performance.

Marse says, "Bob, wrote this duo for violin and piano and it is a wonderful piece – fun to play but also virtuosic and pianistic. The audience always of loves it. Also a couple a summers ago I found his "Three Waltzes for Piano" that I love to play.

"After playing these two pieces that I loved, I called Bob and asked him if he had anything else I could play. Soon he sent me the Variations. I was immediately drawn to the theme."

Marse has known Timothy Muffitt for several years. "I met Tim in Austin when I played the Bartok piano concerto with him and knew that he would understand this piece. Tim immediately said he would do it."

While most contemporary composers experiment with lots of various

percussion instruments and large brass sections, Aldridge decided to go retro with this new piece. "I wanted to use a small orchestra – it's scored for strings, woodwinds and horns. I found a new freedom working on this music totally on my own. It's simple and flexible"

His soloist says, "In this work he is paying homage to the classical style. I love the way he creates melody. And Bob has a true sense of the piano. Here, the piano and orchestra act as one"

Aldridge says, "I feel very comfortable that my good friend Melissa is playing it for the premiere."

It's unusual that Aldridge became an orchestral composer – he never played in an orchestra. Although he received his undergraduate in English, he has been a guitarist all of his life.

Aldridge began playing guitar the way most kids pick up the instrument – in a rock band. "Yes, I admit it. I used to like rock music. I listened to the Stones, and all the other rock bands, but I soon out-grew it. I began to explore jazz and then classical music. However, my music today is very influenced by rock and jazz.

"But once you hear Brahms, how can you go back to rock?"

Although Aldridge's new piece is being premiered on Friday, he's open for his "Variations" to still be a work in progress. "I'm really looking forward to hearing the piece, and who knows, I may decide to write a couple of new variations, depending on how it sounds."

Everything about this performance will be unique and fresh.

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—ABC News