

Four guys saxes and fries

Oddball, awesome music energizes all-American night at the LSO

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

Lansing Symphony Orchestra concerts routinely exude power, nobility and lyricism. Eccentricity? Not so much. Weirdness? Hardly ever.

Saturday's unorthodox all-American slate zapped a new muscle in the audience's collective brain with its featured work, a concerto for four saxophones and orchestra by Ann Arbor composer William Bolcom.

Review

The oily sound of four saxophones, floating around like a rainbow-colored slick on the familiar orchestral lake, was enough to knock you off base from the start.

The concerto is full of old-timey music, cleverly deconstructed — fitting for hipster-infested Ann Arbor — without puncturing the ham and losing the juice. In the first movement, a corry tune with a Roaring '20s feel was slowed down, sped up and corkscrewed in numerous amusing ways.

More than once, soloists Joe Lulloff, Jim Forger, Griffin Campbell and Chris Crevis-

ton made their entrance in sequence, like the Three Stooges doing their famous "hello-hello-hello" salutation.

Generally speaking, when classical composers try to be funny, it's time to run for the hills. But Bolcom's concerto uses slapstick touches like a dentist uses gas: to relax you so he can go to work. The sax quartet, maestro Timothy Muffitt and the orchestra worked like mad to bring out every detail of Bolcom's cubist, polystylistic canvas, turning on a dime dozens of times without making it seem like work.

After a lot of back-and-forth bustle, the music settled into a lovely but truly bizarre lullaby that made me wonder what was in that happy gas. Thickening their tone to the viscosity of Venusian molasses, the quartet played three loving notes, suggesting the words "go to sleep." The restless, undulating harmony suggested a mama squid singing to her baby at the bottom of the ocean. Around this tender scene, alternating icy and warm currents emanated from the strings and brass, with seaweed-like woodwind trills, bubbles of percussion and other bits of weirdness.

The third movement had a old-fashioned, Gregory-Peck-walking-down-Main-Street feeling, punctuated by circus and parade-like fits, starts and interruptions. (It was a nice setup for the next composer on

the slate, Leonard Bernstein, the master of exuberant self-interruption.)

Finally, with headlong energy and perfect timing, the quartet divined a pseudo-bebop riff into a Bach-like fugue that almost immediately spiraled out of control and infected the whole orchestra.

A second, far more relaxed melody skirted the edge of sincerity and parody so brazenly the effect is impossible to describe. OK, here goes: It sounded like a Philco radio playing the old standard "It's Almost Like Falling In Love," while being tossed around in the mud by a curious baby elephant.

Through it all, the quartet warbled, wobbled and wriggled with a collective charisma that went off the charts. Tenor man Lulloff seemed to be the chief instigator, leaning forward to put the music over, turning to his colleagues to egg them on, raising his eyebrows in a lascivious manner when needed. Forger, on alto, brought a sneaker humor and an inexhaustible spectrum of tone colors. Creviston on soprano and Campbell on baritone were deep in the voo-woo zone, holding up the high and low ends with aplomb.

The novelty of the Bolcom piece, and its thorough workover from Muffitt and the crew, should not obscure the evening's biggest triumph: an energized, towering, pro-found performance of Samuel Barber's First

Symphony. Damn, they managed to sneak in that power, nobility and lyricism after all.

Best of all, Muffitt gave the Barber an exhilarating, sea-spray feel of adventure. Every player seemed locked into the score and swept up in the music's power.

In one of many compelling moments, each section of the orchestra bleeped a staccato, telegraph-like message to the other. The message was picked up by ever larger masses of instruments, like an alarm building to panic. Suddenly, the whole orchestra widened and flattened to a single low note, like an indigo ocean horizon, across which Jan Eberle took glorious sail with a gorgeous, extended oboe solo. There followed another majestic buildup, a pensive ebb of the tide, and a crowning, furious storm surge, with flecks of foam, lightning and a mighty undertow. With apologies to Leonard Slatkin and everybody else who has recorded this piece, Saturday's performance was the by far the strongest I've ever heard.

The evening finale, three dances from Bernstein's "On the Town," started raggedly, with a few timing glitches and an overall pallor. Just when I began to wonder if the orchestra had blown its wad with the superb Barber and Bolcom blowouts, the music jumped to life in the third part, another all-American mess of restless, skyscraping city life.

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