

tronic sound, when I was both nervous and excited about," said Menzo in the album's notes. "As a classically trained composer and musician, it has always been a goal of mine to tastefully use electronic instruments in a way that still sounds natural and musical when added to a mix."

End-ish times

Dead Russian dances with a live American at Lansing Symphony season closer

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

By now, people expect rapture — if not The Rapture — from Lansing Symphony Orchestra season finales.

Friday's splendid concert, the final salvo of the 2014-15 season, brought rapture, all right, but with a touch of unease. After an evening of old-sounding "new" music and new-sounding "old" music, you have to wonder whether we are living in the symphony orchestra's end times — or at least its end-ish times.

Which piece of music, do you suppose, rocked the audience with off-kilter shocks, arrestingly fresh sonorities, daring rhythmic displacements, rug-pulling mood shifts and overall what-the-hell-is-coming-next-ness?

Hint: It wasn't the evening's world premiere of "Variations on a Folk Tune for Piano and Orchestra" by American neo-romantic Robert Aldridge. (It wasn't the "William Tell" Overture either, although Rossini's famous romp gets second place in Friday's fresh tomato contest.)

his voice into an other-worldly choir for the next tune, the mellow "Interstellar Love Song."

Menzo returns to liquid metaphors with "Rain," showering the listener with cascading, Steve Reich-ian arpeggios while a queasy bass line pulsates underneath like an unset-

Alas, Aldridge's music, cannily crafted and played with verve and precision, already sounded middle-aged in its cradle.

Aldridge is in a growing group of American composers to move into a cozy cul-de-sac in the suburbs of the sprawling, towering symphonic Babel of old, complete with Neighborhood Watch on the lookout for jarring noises.

When a composer is as sure of his idiom as Aldridge, and an orchestra as game as Lansing's, there is pleasure to be had. The titular theme of "Variations" is a plaintive, call-and-response cry John Coltrane might have picked up and carried to the far horizons. Pianist Melissa Marse avoided the huffing and puffing and banging that would have sunk the enterprise. She kept a light touch, darting, hovering and surging up the stream of variations like a supple rainbow trout.

One of the variations, a thundering gallop driven by a terrific timpani tantrum, kicked at the barn door of the familiar neo-romantic formula.

The rest were saturated in honeyed tones and surging waves of drama, the symphonic equivalent of comfort food. Classic film music, a passion of Aldridge, often came to mind. One variation seemed to send the main melody out for drinks at Sardi's to

into a vocal trance.

With this album, Menzo has created a potent mix of electronic pop and indie rock, laced with a dose of psychedelia. But this is no sprawling, mid-'60s concept album. The eight-song album clocks in at a tight 31 minutes. In addition to showcasing Menzo's

make moon eyes at Audrey Hepburn. You knew a vigorous major-chord hosing would be followed by a delicate after-tinkle, even before the tinkle tinkled.

A cynic might say that the world has gained another new work that can be programmed in middle-town symphony orchestras without pissing off older subscribers.

But I'm not a cynic. It helped me to think of "Variations" as finely wrought film music, a once-honorable art that in the past 20 years has swirled straight down a toilet of turdfully beating drums and Carl Orff-ish devil chanting. Aldridge's craft comes into dramatic relief when set against cinematic wreckers like Brian Tyler, say.

But he hasn't chosen that company, and he wasn't in it Friday.

Instead, he had the bad fortune of being upstaged by the most formidable showman/innovator of 20th century music.

Count the home team's rampage through Igor Stravinsky's "Firebird" Suite as one of its finest hours, ever. The sheer shock and awe, even in one of Stravinsky's more crowd-pleasing and child-friendly scores, slapped your face all the more after the mothball smell of "new" music.

The symphony's strings may have never sounded so velvety and lush, but they kept

ity, and I thought this new album would be a great way to do just that," said Menzo. "Not only will it bring awareness to the Music Tools program itself, and the great resources that the library has to offer, but I aim to inspire the local youth to dream new possibilities for music, art and expression."

the texture under fine control, thinning themselves into a billowing gossamer borealis when the music called for it.

To coordinate the music's pinballing course, Maestro Timothy Muffitt made enormous double circles with his arms I'm not sure I've ever beheld before. In slow build-ups, he rode the brakes in a mad-deningly methodical manner, delaying and heightening the orgasmic fireworks to follow. Many soloists were exposed, and all of them delivered the goods — most notably, principal cellist Hong Hong, whose tender stillness perfectly set the stage for the tumult to come.

Of course, it's grossly unfair to compare any mortal, living or dead, with Stravinsky. "Firebird" is the cat-and-mouse play of a genius, with fakeouts and sucker punches that make its straight-up wonderment all the more overwhelming. The LSO took it all on, from the tricky to the taxing, with the aplomb of a big-city symphony, minus the jaded air of entitlement. ("Rite of Spring," anyone? They seem ready to me.)

So what if Babel's new subdivision is a dead end. You can always go back to Tomorrowland. By the time the final chords of "The Firebird" bashed the walls of the Wharton Center Friday, Stravinsky still sounded like the music of the future.