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DSO Opens Season with Tribute to Leonard Bernstein

By Christine Facciolo

The Delaware Symphony Orchestra (DSO) wowed a near-capacity audience at The Grand on Friday, September 28 as it opened its 2018-19 season with a quintessential American program.

The concert, titled “The American Dream: A Tribute to Leonard Bernstein,” celebrated the composer’s centenary as it honored contemporary composer Robert Paterson, this year’s recipient of the Alfred I. du Pont Composer’s Award.

The concert opened with Paterson’s *Dark Mountains*. Prior to the concert, the composer offered some thoughts about his compositional processes and attitudes. He told the audience that he was not a “lab coat” composer who wrote not for his colleagues but for the concert-going public. Moreover, he added that no special knowledge is needed to enjoy classical music and that no one is obligated to like a piece of music because it’s “classical” or otherwise.

Commissioned by the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, *Dark Mountains* takes inspiration from the terrain and the shifting atmospheres it creates in the state. The work unfolds in three connected but contrasting sections. The first and third sections depict placid scenes with plenty of lyrical and expansive passages replete with sounds of chirping birds and crickets. The middle section recalls a drive through the twisting roads of the mountains under a darkening sky. Jagged rhythms with shifting meters and slashing dissonances make for a most intriguing and eclectic work.

By contrast, Aaron Copland’s perennially popular *Appalachian Spring* is characterized by an optimistic sound that evokes a boundless but tempered optimism. *Appalachian Spring* recounts in musical terms the struggle and joy of those in the American Christian “Shaker” movement of the mid-19th Century who created a new life in the wilderness. In eight short moments, Copland takes us on a challenging musical journey. The tempi alter dramatically, making it challenging not only for the musicians but for the conductor, both of whom poured everything they had into their performance of this complex work.

Like Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*, *Medea’s Meditation and Dance of Vengeance* derives from a ballet Samuel Barber wrote for Martha Graham. But whereas the Copland work is placid and idyllic, Barber’s *Medea* is unsettling and deranged.

The tone poem extracted from the music progresses from a bleak inward concentration to the murderous Medea’s climactic final frenzy. Under Amado’s exacting direction, the orchestra handled the complex cross-rhythms with crackling virtuosity, rising inexorably to the bravura coda depicting Medea’s unbridled fury.

The highlight in a program full of highlights was guest violinist Jennifer Koh’s brilliant outing in Bernstein’s *Serenade* (after Plato’s Symposium). The celebrated *Serenade* is a work for solo violin and orchestra inspired by Plato’s dialogues about the nature and purpose of love. Each of the work’s five movements features a philosopher’s views on the subject as well as commentary on the others’ views.

Amado and the DSO made much of the work’s contrasting moods, from the lyrical first movement to the chaotic finale with its constantly changing meters. Koh was of a similar mindset, as her brilliant and polished playing alternated from sinewy to serene while always maintaining a beautiful rich tone.

See www.delawaresymphony.org.

Posted by [Michelle Kramer-Fitzgerald](#)