

The Delaware Symphony Orchestra presents *'Bohemian Rhapsody'* A symphony for the spheres

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To open the Delaware Symphony Orchestra's 114th season, Maestro David Amado and the orchestra presented *Bohemian Rhapsody*, a lush and beautifully played concert with some local twists. The musical evening began (as always at the year's first concert) with a rousing national anthem, a tradition the audience clearly loves.



She wrote music in the shape of the solar system: composer Missy Mazzoli with the Delaware Symphony Orchestra. (Photo by Martín Martínez.)

Before the music, Missy Mazzoli was called onstage to receive the DSO's Alfred I. duPont Award, given yearly since 1985. A widely played and Grammy-nominated composer, Mazzoli ("raised just up the road in Lansdale" and former composer-in-residence at Opera Philadelphia) said she was excited to join a pantheon of winners that includes George Crumb, Phillip Glass, John Adams, and Jennifer Higdon.

A musical galaxy

Amado opened the evening with Mazzoli's mysterious *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)*. In pre-concert remarks, the composer said the impulse for her 2013 work was "three simple chords" and

a desire to “write music in the shape of the solar system.” As well as a musical description, “sinfonia” is an old Italian term for the medieval hurdy-gurdy. To evoke its wheezing sounds, Mazzoli added some unusual instrumentation – melodica (a piano you blow into) and harmonica.

The textural work is both rich and transparent, looping fluidly back on itself or leaping away, sliding subtly in and out of dynamic variations that evoke planetary orbits. Lush and magical, the piece opens with a dreamy *sostenuto* embellished by slight tonal movements—grace notes, nearly imperceptible slides, minimal intervals—to create a cinematic sweep out of stasis. This seemingly casual, effortless musical movement and rhythmic interplay is actually the result of intricate writing, fully realized by the orchestra’s precise intonation and sensitive attention to Mazzoli’s ethereal tempi and elegant musical detail.

Not-so-soapy concerto

Guest artist Tessa Lark then took the stage for a mesmerizing performance of Samuel Barber’s Violin Concerto. The composer (a West Chester native who was both a student and composition professor at Curtis) was commissioned to write this gorgeous work by soap magnate Samuel Fels, and Barber called it his “concerto da sapone,” or “soap” concerto. But his clever nickname belies the beauty and scope of this widely played and well-loved work.

Similar in tempo and intensity, the first two movements lead to a third that is a virtuosic violin display of perpetual motion, with dramatic orchestral passages and frequent interplay between conductor and soloist. Lark played brilliantly and passionately on a remarkable and remarkably beautiful violin by G.P. Maggini (ca. 1600). Speaking before the concert, she noted that Stradivari modeled his work on this luthier’s instruments, and hers had a deep, viola-like tone that perfectly fit the rich sonorities of Barber’s work.

Because soloist and orchestra speak regularly to one another in small motifs—passed back and forth more frequently than is often the case in a concerto—this work requires the great finesse and intimate communication here achieved by both parties. Unusually, soloist and orchestra open the work by playing together. They end together, too, with a quiet, heart-stopping musical exhalation.

Urged on by a cheering audience, Lark—raised in Kentucky and also widely known for playing bluegrass—gave the audience an exciting encore from her album (released on concert day) that began with a simple Appalachian melody and took off into a fiddler’s stratosphere.

Delicacy, boldness, and thrills

The luscious program closed with the Symphony No. 8 by Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904). This monumental work is written in G major, but it actually begins in G minor, only one of the composer’s innovations in a piece crammed with variety—variations in tempo and dynamics, rising and descending motifs, and colorful musical features showcasing each orchestra section. Throughout the work’s four movements, Amado led the DSO in a seamless performance that blended the composer’s alternating delicacy and boldness into a thrilling whole.

Amid frequent bravura passages—with instrumentals rising from the group and a majestic solo passage for the evening's concertmaster Jeongmin Lee—were quiet times when it seemed there was only a memory of sound. And throughout, Amado daringly utilized silence, extending rests to become part of the aural landscape rather than simply a pause until the music continued.

Conductor and orchestra clearly love to play Dvořák because—as Lark did earlier—they offered the audience a bijou: No. 8 (*Furiante*, in G minor) from the composer's first set of Slavonic Dances (Op. 46), bringing their season opener to a joyful and memorable conclusion.