

Guest Conductor Offers a Musical Travelogue

Written by Abbie Dombrock

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From the jungle of Puerto Rico to America's heartland, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra transported the audience with its renditions of several very different yet similarly influenced composers on February 4. Guest conductor Harvey Felder invited the audience at the almost-packed Centennial Hall to experience the art of three fairly modern composers who wrote music based on their heritage. Each composer wrote the music in a way that adheres to traditional European style while presenting ideas from particular cultures.

The most engaging piece of the evening was Roberto Sierra's *Celebration*, the final movement from *Tropicalia*. He used the entire percussion section to create an aura of a place filled with strange animals and ominous insects, an apt musical description of his birthplace, Puerto Rico. Highly percussive, the entire orchestra entered the fray, pounding and coaxing syncopated rhythms written in time signatures that seem exotic to our Westernized ears used to 4/4 patterns. Dissonance and competing textures completed the scene, at one time mixing melodic strings with harsh, biting winds. The feeling was fitting, however; the jungle is full of strangely beautiful yet dangerous plants and animals. Although the piece was foreign to our ears, Sierra maintained a traditional pattern of composition, presenting the piece in a familiar A-B-A pattern. Sierra interrupted two presentations of the same A theme with a more subdued B section.

Antonin Dvorak's *Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70*, was also a rhythmic and percussive piece, although the percussion section consisted of a single tympani player. The entire orchestra created the strong rhythms. Dvorak's attempt to be taken seriously by his peers, the composition was full of dark, somber passages, which changed to ... well, not really light-hearted, but more positive-sounding strains before reverting to pounding repeated rhythms that were a bit overwhelming at times. I became somewhat bored during this piece, as the rhythms became repetitive at times, but I enjoyed the Scherzo dance movement, during which Dvorak used Bohemian-sounding themes and introduced the audience to the music of his birthplace.

Aaron Copland's suite from *The Tender Land* was sickeningly sweet and a bit blah, but the

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piece was well performed. It effectively reminded me of a

Little House on the Prairie

scene, which was probably the effect Copland was trying to accomplish. Based on an opera meant to be sung by young voices, the music follows the story of a young farm girl who finds her first love and then leaves home. After the dramatic endeavor was a flop, Copland rearranged the themes from the opera into the suite as we heard it. The performance was beautiful, but I think I would have enjoyed it more as a backdrop rather than the focal point of entertainment.

In preparation for this concert, I attended the "Conducting Conversation" lecture on February 2 at the River Music Experience. I would recommend that anyone interested in classical music attend one of these conversations. Felder discussed his background and the symphony, and he educated attendees on the specific pieces we heard on Saturday. Felder also explained how Saturday's program came about.

For the past year and a half, he has collaborated with Quad City Symphony Orchestra Artistic Director Donald Schleicher, working to choose the program and make this concert happen. To put the program together, Felder analyzed the symphony's repertoire, researched pieces he thought would make the repertoire more complete, traveled to the Quad Cities, and hosted a whirlwind of five practices. His educational role extended to the performance on Saturday, and I appreciated his conversational, inviting, and informative introductions to each piece, which enhanced the experience immensely.