

Important new American piano concerto première in Wheeling

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By Phillip Nones, 21 May 2016

The caliber of America's regional orchestras can be surprisingly good. Such is the case with the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra in West Virginia. For this concert, WSO music director André Raphel chose an inventive program of French repertoire alongside a new piano concerto by American composer Kenneth Fuchs.



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Maestro Raphel opened the program with Chabrier's *Joyeuse marche*, the sort of boisterous number that used to be programmed by the likes of Paul Paray and Sir Thomas Beecham "back in the day", but one rarely encounters it in the concert hall now. From the piece's very opening measures, one could sense that this is no march in the traditional sense, but one that's jaunty in a kick-up-your-heels kind of way. This performance had a real swagger and it made for a rousing program-opener.

In marked contrast to Chabrier was the Fauré's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Composed in 1898 as incidental music for a dramatic production of Maeterlinck's play in London, the concert suite consists of four numbers. The *Prélude* set the mood with genial pacing and the chorale-like strings blending beautifully in rich harmonies with solo flute and other woodwinds. In particular, the solo passages by WSO principal cellist Elisa Kohanski were conveyed with a rare poignancy. Likewise, the fine Wheeling winds, particularly the oboe and horns, gave the *Fileuse* movement a certain forward propulsion. In the familiar *Sicilienne* movement, Raphel captured just the right mood, plaintive without sounding mawkish. The final movement, portraying Melisande's death, had real pathos, sounding very much like a funeral procession and then fading out beautifully as the music died away. Overall, it was a special performance.

A break from the French repertoire brought pianist Jeffrey Biegel to the stage to present the première of the Piano Concerto by Kenneth Fuchs, completed in 2015, the WSO being one of two co-commissioning orchestras presenting première performances.

Fuchs' music is immediately accessible – rooted in tonality but sounding contemporary. Like other contemporary American composers such as Richard Danielpour and Roberto Sierra, he is not afraid to write in an idiom that speaks to the heart as well as the head.

Subtitled "Spiritualist," the new piano concerto is in three movements, each inspired by an abstract painting by the American artist Helen Frankenthaler. The first movement, after the painting "Spiritualist," has a bright palette and features several themes that could be described as "striving". The movement ends quietly, followed by the next one inspired by the painting "Silent Wish". This is the emotional centerpiece of the concerto, evoking the human desire for simplicity and beauty in the face of harsh reality. This beauty/simplicity was characterized by solo piano phrases reminiscent of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies*, contrasted by outbursts by the full orchestra, replete with brass and percussion ejaculations of sound. The movement ends quietly but on a seemingly unresolved note, leading to the final movement inspired by the painting "Natural Answer". Here, the "striving" themes of the first movement return, accompanied by jaunty, syncopated piano writing that conveys a sense of optimism and good spirits. The concerto ends with an exhilarating flourish.

Jeffrey Biegel's performance was impressive. Clearly, he has the full measure of this music, manifested by technical mastery, effective contrasts and tight alignment with the orchestra. On the basis of tonight's performance and the warm audience reception, it is easy to imagine this work joining the ranks of important contemporary American concertante works.

Following intermission, Raphel and the WSO launched into a big-boned presentation of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. One of the earliest programmatic symphonies, Berlioz was ahead of his time in composing it. Raphel's approach was to accentuate the passions inherent in the music and the many contrasts in the score.

I would have preferred a little more propulsion in the second movement (A Ball), but even so it was a bright affair, with engaging woodwinds accentuated by the dancing of the strings and harps. In the Scene in the Countryside, I was particularly impressed with the woodwind interplay. In the final two movements, Berlioz's phantasmagorical imagery really came to life. The March to the Scaffold was both stentorian and raucous at once, leading into the creepy opening of the final movement, Dream of the Witches' Sabbath. From there to the end, the music was terrifically exciting even as Raphel exerted perfect control over the proceedings. It was a brilliant conclusion to a concert of some highly interesting and consequential music.