

Andre Raphel Smith celebrates American themes

BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER

Post-Dispatch Classical Music Critic

Conductor Andre Raphel Smith returned to Powell Hall on Friday morning to lead members of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in a well-designed program of music informed by an American aesthetic, played for a sold-out house. Smith's conducting is clear and energetic; his ideas are well formed. The combination made for a successful concert.

The first half was music of Aaron Copland, whose centenary it is. The program opened with the astringent *Orchestral Variations*, an exercise in modernism from 1958, nicely played. "Quiet City," premiered in 1941, offered a jazzy contrast in a more listener friendly idiom. It was notable for the silken playing of the strings and the solo contributions of Marc Gordon on English horn and Thomas Drake on trumpet. Drake played with pinpoint accuracy, clarity and fine control; Gordon offered a beautifully sustained line and mellow tone.

It led comfortably into the familiar "Appalachian Spring" in a well-performed, sweetly evocative performance with fine solo contributions from principal clarinet George Silfies, trumpeters Tage Larsen and Gary Smith, principal flute Mark Sparks and principal oboe Peter Bowman.

If Copland borrowed American folk melodies, Antonin Dvorak soaked up American influences during his stay in this country. His *Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op 95, "From the New World,"* written while he was working in the United States, is a European symphony gifted with the fresh perspectives of this hemisphere. Smith offered a spirited reading of the first movement, began the second movement in a somewhat perfunctory fashion, then found his focus and recovered. The rest of this deservedly popular piece was strong and satisfying, building to an exciting finish.