

Born in the U.S.A.? Two concerts called American have less than native content — but that's OK, say those involved

By HARRIET HOWARD HEITHAUS

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We've all taken the buy-American pledge. Shunned those Chinese sweaters at our favorite boutique. Read the country of origin on the mangoes at Sweetbay.

We've all become sensitive about supporting our own industries. That is until we get to the box office. A look at two concerts with the "American" label on them show that music by American composers may only be half, if that much, of the content.

Ask the conductors and a music school director and you get three different answers as to why American orchestral music isn't a specific draw: style, balance and focus.

Cue the cannons

In an upcoming concert titled "All-American" with the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra this weekend, the "American" is more in style than content. That's how guest conductor Stuart Chafetz (pronounced CHAY-fits) sees it.

"It's kind of curious, the name," conceded Chafetz, who is resident conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony. "It's kind of an American pops concert in the style of Arthur Fiedler. It's all really his favorites that he recorded, that he performed often."

The concert is subtitled "Around the World with Arthur Fiedler II."

"We did this last year and the concept was so popular we decided to do it again," explained Chafetz, who been here three times as a guest conductor. On the program are two to three American works, Gould's "American Salute," and several Sousa favorites. The rest are from Britain (William Walton's "Crown Imperial" March), Russia (Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol") and Norway (excerpts from the "Peer Gynt" Suite by Edvard Grieg).

It's not that Americans don't love American music: it's just that the broader appeal may be to American style, he suggested:

"It's fast paced; it's easily accessible. You're not going to fall asleep. It's a concert where you can bring the whole family. ... which is something more and more necessary."

Chafetz says there's plenty of American 20th-century music around in standard

concert repertoire, such as George Gershwin, Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein.

But Connecticut-born Chafetz, who grew up going to Fiedler's concerts, loves the fare the silver-maned maestro popularized.

"The 1812 (Overture, by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky) has become so Americanized, we've sort of taken it over," he said.

The delicate balance

Michael Hall, music director and conductor of the Southwest Florida Symphony, calls American music — particularly new American music — "a matter of balance." He has scheduled Frank Ticheli's 2003 composition, "Shooting Stars," for the orchestra's opening concert Nov. 21.

Hall says this piece wasn't a stretch for him to find: He conducted it with the Pacific Orchestra, which commissioned it. Hall says he likes its muted brass, which comes out in a meteor-shower rush of sound, and its zingy extraterrestrial chime glissando. He also likes its attention to solo spots for nearly every section of the orchestra. There are vapor trails from the woodwinds and strings in this piece as well as percussion work.

"It's very short — maybe six minutes, not even. As the title suggests, it's high energy, rhythmically oriented. It's a whirlwind beginning to the concert." But Hall said he wouldn't generally schedule an entire concert of new American music. In fact, the centerpiece of this concert, titled, "Made in America," may be Dvorak's New World Symphony, a Czech composition flavored with American themes. (The third work is Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto, with Timothy Fain as soloist.)

"It's certainly a balance," Hall said during rehearsal for a pops concert last week.

"It's important that new music is heard in Southwest Florida, but I think when it's performed with music people are familiar with, they're very willing to try something new. I don't think people aren't given enough credit for exploring new music. I know there are people here who are interested in it."

The Southwest Florida Symphony is commissioning two works to celebrate its 50th season next year. Paul Richards, associate professor of composition at the University of Florida, will compose one. The other composer is a familiar name in Southwest Florida, Jim Stephenson, former principal trumpet of the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra. Stephenson is now a professional composer living in Chicago.

Hall also points out that an "American" sound is not particularly the province of Americans. The Dvorak New World Symphony, for example, was composed after Dvorak's tenure at a music school in New York City, during which the composer successfully absorbed every native genre he could hear, including black spirituals. The familiar hymn associated with its Largo, "Goin' Home," was actually written for an adaptation of Dvorak's Largo, not the other way around.

Getting to know you

“What every person craves (in my belief) is familiarity, a comfort zone. This is not to be scorned. It is a simple and natural truth. How many of us go to a party where we don't know anyone? How many of us go to a movie we've never heard of?” asked Jim Stephenson, the composer who is composing an anniversary work for the Southwest Florida Symphony. Stephenson responded by e-mail to a set of questions about music programming, including American music.

“Let me flip that around for one second. How many of us have gone to a movie simply on someone else's recommendation, whether it be a friend, movie critic, family member, et cetera?”

Program the composers work twice in a year, leading with his or her best short piece several months before a full-length one, he suggested. That way the audience gets a sense of the composer's style and feels less intimidated about hearing a longer piece. They may even bring a friend, he said.

Can you hear me now?

Robert Thayer, interim director of the Bower School of Music at Florida Gulf Coast University, sees American music as subject to the same prejudices all new music is. The U.S. has a centuries-shorter heritage than Europe, and its contemporary composition has some pretty intense repertoire.

“I think the idea is right that it's not often considered approachable. It takes some concentration to hear. It requires some attention,” observed Thayer, retired chair of the music education department at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University. Thayer says he listened to violinist Charles Stegeman talk about a Beethoven Sonata at a concert at FGCU the previous week, and Stegeman pointed out that the sonata had not been performed in sequence at its premiere.

“What that suggests is that there was a lot going on besides listening to music — that people weren't a lot different than we are. We tend to think of music as something we put on when we're doing something else. It's sort of wallpaper for us, a nice background.

“But when we talk about contemporary concert music we tend to want people to focus. We tend to get upset if they rattle their program or unwrap their gum or have to sneeze,” he said. Apparently, they were doing much more than that in Beethoven's era.

Thayer says American music American concert music, more introspective in the 20th century, is tapping into popular forms that enhance it. He recalled a work at Stegeman's recital created by University of Michigan faculty member and composer, William Bolcom. Within it was a ragtime interlude, not far afield from a Scott Joplin work.

“This was an example of immediate appeal — yet a serious piece.”

IF YOU GO

* *"All-American Pops! Around the World with Arthur Fiedler II"*

What: Naples Philharmonic Orchestra with Stuart Chafetz, guest conductor

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Philharmonic Center for the Arts, 5833 Pelican Bay Boulevard, Naples

Prices: \$37; \$25 for students

Tickets: 597-1900

* *"Made in America"*

What: The opening concert of the Southwest Florida Symphony 2009-2010 season; free pre-concert discussion one hour before the concert

When: 8 p.m. November 21

Where: Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall, 8099 College Parkway, Fort Myers

Prices: From upper balcony, \$16, to loge \$67 in six price ranges

Tickets: (239) 418-1500

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