

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

INTERVIEW WITH MAESTRO DAVID ALAN MILLER

Looking as if a few choice, slightly seedy blocks were snatched up from Greenwich Village and plunked down in Albany's central city district, Lark Street is a fascinating, hip place. With a row of laid-back watering holes, eateries and latte dens, it was a good place to sit down for awhile with David Alan Miller, the conductor and Music Director of the Albany Symphony Orchestra over a cup of coffee. Miller is a young and energetic man, charming and likeable, irrepressible and ardent. He has the same messianic zeal that Leonard Bernstein had – a mission to convince you of his love for music – all kinds of it – and to prove to you, through the force of his high strung but always cheerful personality, that classical music is really important – it's not just entertainment or an indulgence for an elite class of sedate listeners. No, it's absolutely necessary. Listen to him for just a few minutes and you'll be convinced; I have rarely encountered a more articulate spokesman for the cause. Miller has a talent for speaking off the cuff; his knowledge of music history and the full repertoire of classical music enable him to fire off facts, figures and opinions at his popular pre-concert conversations. It's clear that audiences love him, judging by the filled seats for the talks one hour before the ASO concerts.

Right about now he's thinking seriously about next season. All orchestras have to schedule their programs at least a year in advance. It takes a great deal of time and thought to plan interesting concerts, so that the three-to-five pieces on a typical classical program form a logical progression. Since the Albany Symphony commissions so many new pieces, Miller is even more concerned with "flow" and thematic content. And you won't find a conductor more committed to new music than David Alan Miller. He wants to re-balance the scales so that the ratio of dead to living composers on ASO programs is equal. This is not typical with most orchestras, where the old masterpieces reign supreme and form the core of what listeners gladly encounter. Of course, to most people, that is what classical music is – Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms et al.

With an eye on the future, rather than the past, Miller has befriended a gaggle of young composers – mostly this side of thirty-five – who have a

desperate need to communicate with audiences - to embrace listeners with accessible new music in a dizzying array of styles. Recognizing that opportunity is the mother's milk of creativity, Miller has become a sort of Pied Piper to these composers, leading the way for them to create for his orchestra. A case in point was the "Spirituals II" concerts, held in Albany, Saratoga and Pittsfield last month. Miller asked seven composers to "re-imagine" classic African-American spirituals, and to compose new settings of these timeless melodies for baritone (superbly sung by Nathan Myers) and the Albany Symphony. What resulted was seven pieces tied to a common thread (the spiritual melodies), but each of the seven was stylistically different. And it worked.

"People have to care about music...that's my job," he says. "I won't accept the fact that people have become alienated from new music, because these ASO commissions have become our engine for growth. As long as we embrace the present and not turn our back on the past, we'll have an audience. These new works are compelling and relevant, and I'm convinced that orchestras will see the wisdom of making every concert a special, exciting event, with a world premiere to hear, argue over and evaluate. This is what music was once, and what it can, and should be now."

Whether the larger orchestras in important cultural meccas like New York and Chicago will adopt David Miller's programming ideas remains an open question. Signs are that some will. The San Francisco Symphony has embraced John Adams' music, and brought it to national visibility and acclaim. The Los Angeles Philharmonic, with its new Frank Gehry-designed Disney concert hall is now routinely programming new music – and not all of it has sure-fire audience appeal.

Certainly large and influential orchestras in the major cities can, and should take risks. Their reputations are riding on being at the center of "where the action is," and sophisticated audiences have come to expect – and to demand – the musical equivalent of international touring art exhibits. Is "Steve Reich and Musicians" a draw, along with Yo-Yo Ma and James Galway? You bet. Miller's risk-taking programming is paying off, and is, year after year, proving to be less of a gamble, even in the relatively small Capital Region and Berkshires market.

"We can do things in Albany and in this region when we tour Saratoga and Pittsfield that really speak to our audience. We program the great masters

along with new music, practically at every concert. I see concerts moving away from the “great books” approach of 150 years ago. Back then, in Boston, you could pick up a copy of “Dwight’s Journal” and read that ‘the great body of classic works must be revered above and beyond our time.’ That was when looking backward, not forward, started to take root – in music and also in literature, painting – the arts in general. Composition and performance became two separate specializations. We should remember that Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and others were composer/performers. They needed to compose new music to meet the demands of an urbane and knowledgeable public which always wanted new things – not last year’s concerto; they’d heard that; ‘what do you have that’s new, Herr Mozart?’”

It’s clear the Albany Symphony, under David Alan Miller’s leadership is in the vanguard of forward-looking American orchestras. The concert this week is an example of that thinking: Yo-Yo Ma will perform Brahms’ “Double Concerto” for violin and cello, along with the “Triple Concerto” for violin, cello and piano of Beethoven. There will also be a world premiere by composer Bun Ching Lam: “To Poestenkill” – part of the ASO’s “American Memories, American Dreams” series of commissions. Never heard of her? That’s all right; it’ll be new and very different from Brahms. During intermission you can argue heatedly about the merits of the piece with the person next to you, and look forward to the Beethoven. Concert date, time and place is Friday, January 20th, 7:30pm at the Palace Theatre, Albany. For tickets and information, call 518-465-4755.

Considering the above, here’s a reflection on this whole business of old versus new, traditional as opposed to modern. The appreciation of the unfamiliar is always difficult, because there is generally no perspective (time and style comparisons) with which to evaluate that which at first blush appears to be strange and unknown.

The eminent physicist Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976), father of the “Uncertainty Principle” in his book “Physics and Reality” wrote: *“One may say that the human ability to understand may be in a certain sense unlimited. But the existing scientific concepts cover always only a very limited part of reality, and the other part that has not yet been understood is infinite. Whenever we proceed from the known to the unknown we may hope to understand, but we may have to learn at the same time a new meaning of the word ‘understanding.’”*

If I may be permitted the liberty to replace the word “scientific” with ‘musical,’ then this meditation may offer some insight and direction for listening to new music: At its simplest level, understanding might mean accepting that what is new simply exists; it is just one version of an infinite number of ordered musical possibilities in time. Food for thought, perhaps?

Send your comments to Stephen Dankner at sdankner@earthlink.net