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Boulder Philharmonic's American-theme program deserves salute

By Sabine Kortals, February 21, 2011

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Music director and conductor Michael Butterman and his band of dedicated musicians in the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra make the drive between Denver and Boulder well worth the trip.

At Macky Auditorium on Saturday, the amiable young maestro and two stars — clarinetist Richard Stoltzman and composer Bill Douglas — packed the 2,000-seat house.

The philharmonic's subscription rate is at a five-year high, and one secret to the uptick might be that, while Butterman's baton evokes quality musicianship from the orchestra, they don't take themselves too seriously. There is a lightness of being and joy of performing among the players that make the whole concert experience what it should be: engaging and entertaining.

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Douglas, based in Boulder, joined Stoltzman onstage for "Feast," a toe-tapping amalgamation of Irish, African and bluesy motifs. With Douglas at the piano, the duo showed off the fun, familiarity and

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friendship of their 40-year artistic collaboration. Butterman added to their antics in a brief and amusing vocal exercise meant to demonstrate the complexity of rhythmic styles.

The American-theme program opened with a pleasing rendition of three dance episodes from Leonard Bernstein's "On the Town." "Times Square" was especially gripping in the orchestra's delivery of the driving, pulsating and perpetual-motion soundscape of the city.

The evening closed with Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World." Replete with elements of spirituals, American Indian and other American musical idioms, the symphony was well-placed on the program. But Butterman's overall slower tempos weighed down the four-movement work in parts, and the orchestra wasn't as crisp and cohesive as in the earlier selections.

Still, a number of standout performances punctuated the symphony — and the program as a whole — including notable solo passages by concertmaster Gregory Walker, principal cellist Charles Lee, principal flutist Pamela Vlieg Martchev and principal clarinetist Stephanie Zelnick.

Richard Stoltzman