

Nationalist themes carry the night by Christopher Guerin



"Lost Souls" was commissioned by the Kansas City Symphony from Avner Dorman who wrote the work for pianist, Alon Goldstein. The final product was a perfect melding of orchestra - with a phenomenal interpretation by Maestro Stern - composition and performance: it was at once Stern's work, and Goldstein's work, and, ultimately, Dorman's work. It is more than fair to expect musical compositions to stand on their own merits, but works can be nuanced by astute

programming, such as that by the Kansas City Symphony (KCS) in its Yardley Hall performance this past Sunday. Nationalist pride yielded a collective *gravitas* whose sum total exceeded the individual contributions of Béla Bartók, Avner Dorman and Jean Sibelius impressively representing their homelands Hungary, Israel and Finland, respectively.

Of music history's better known nationalists (Sibelius among them) it would be a challenge to find one who surpasses Béla Bartók in the breadth of commitment in preserving a people's ethnic music. Not taking anything away from the others, Bartók nevertheless stands out with particular distinction. While it is the ethnomusicologist's calling to historically research and codify such things, Bartók is further distinguished among composers by having *during his lifetime* simultaneously committed to composition *and* musicology with his monumental efforts to record (and in those days, "record" meant *listen to and transcribe by ear*) the folk songs native to the regions around his beloved Hungary. While Bartók is at least equally famous for the infusion of ethnicity into his piano music, in the symphonic setting KCS's presentation of his five "Hungarian Sketches" gave the audience the unique opportunity to experience the full weight of Bartók's musical genius; for he was, as well, one of the master orchestrators of the 20th century. The sparse, modal and rhythmic challenges of Hungary's ethnic music do not lend themselves easily to orchestration, but in Bartók's capable hands those elements combined to preserve the original melodies while advancing the frontiers of 20th century orchestral composition.

Under Michael Stern's baton, these orchestral sketches were presented with a subdued charm which honored the traditions that Bartók painstakingly preserved, while offering up a pristine orchestral delivery that demonstrated the artistic beauty that is possible when even the simplest of melodies is presented by a music director who possesses the wisdom and confidence to not over-conduct or over-interpret compositional perfection that requires neither. As a result, this short (12-minute) collection was the perfect musical *hors d'oeuvre* leading to the entrée of Avner Dorman's world premiere Piano Concerto, "Lost Souls."

So - imagine, if you will, that you **are** in the audience in 1719 as a 34-year-old Bach stands on-stage describing his latest work. You repeat this in 1804 with Beethoven, again in 1867 with Brahms, and finally on a November weekend in 2009 with Avner Dorman. Now, this is by no means intended to compare Mr. Dorman with the masters - time and future musicologists are the arbiters of such things. But these events should be appreciated for what they are: opportunities to hear brand new music introduced by the composer himself. If you're lucky, it will even be a good piece of music, and by that measure **Mr. Dorman and the KCS succeeded with brilliance.**

Dorman described the piano concerto, subtitled "Lost Souls", as a "séance" to pianists and composers of the past, with the opening measures in the orchestra quite literally conjuring up the performer. At the outset, the piano stood empty as ethereal strings set a chilling mood before the lights dimmed gradually to full darkness. Mr. Dorman employed a clever device whereby another piano, hidden back among the orchestra, played a few notes just before the darkness, after which full illumination revealed a corporeal pianist (Alon Goldstein) seated and ready to engage the audience. The presentation had all the earmarks of classic performance art but delivered in a way that was less tacky than one might presume from just hearing its description. Indeed, tackiness would have been a foregone conclusion had the piece fallen flat, but given that it had strong compositional foundations in a work that demonstrated great maturity from the 34-year-old Dorman, it actually worked quite well.

As promised, the piece well represented the first movement's initial struggle ("Séance") between the orchestra and pianist to get in synch with one another - the pianist having just returned from the dead, after all ("decomposition" jokes, anyone?). The second ("Twilight") and third ("Exorcism") movements proceeded to chronologically "time travel" through various musical styles, with thematic snippets recalling images that were stylistically familiar - Baroque, Classical, Romantic, 20th century, Jazz, even Rock - without too obviously quoting any particular composers. The result was more of a *familiarity* that captured various genres. Despite the power of suggestion in the performance notes ("...hints of Bach, Art Tatum, Messiaen, Lutoslawski, Ravel, Ligeti, Sweelinck and Gershwin"), my ears caught a lengthy section in the second movement that reminded me quite a bit of Keith Emerson's under-rated 1977 "Piano Concerto No. 1" (found on ELP's album, "Works, Vol. 1") and a shorter (perhaps 30 seconds or so) section that had elements of Pat Metheny.

"Lost Souls" was commissioned by the Kansas City Symphony from Dorman who wrote the work for pianist, Alon Goldstein. **Goldstein did a remarkable job of navigating his way through 300 years of pianistic stylings - delicately sensitive in the more tonal, melodic themes, and energetically tempestuous in sections that were more dissonant and chordal, where his ginormous Rachmaninoff hands worked to his advantage in several passages.** The final product was a perfect melding of orchestra - with a phenomenal interpretation by Maestro Stern - composition and performance: it was at once Stern's work, and Goldstein's work, and, ultimately, Dorman's work. **This piece left no question in my mind that Avner Dorman is, by any measure, a world-class composer destined for much more greatness.**

After intermission, Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2 in D Major* continued the Nationalist theme. Musically, as beautiful as this piece is, it is anachronistic - a clear throwback to the height of the Romantic period, sonically residing in the last quarter of the 19th century despite its composition in 1901-02. That starkness was made even more evident when compared to the far more modern-sounding, clearly "20th century" orchestral sketches by Bartók, which, completed in 1911, were written barely a decade later. In its own way, though, the programming of Sibelius' 2nd Symphony yielded an intriguing perspective, revealing Sibelius to be the giant of Romantic orchestration that he was; reaffirming Bartók as the visionary modern orchestrator of the early 20th century; and in no small compliment it revealed Dorman to have far more in common with Bartók than Sibelius - compositionally, technically, artistically, and orchestrationally.

All around, this was a fine program with lots of meaty, historical, nationalistic "stuff" to chew on and **the orchestra was nearly flawless throughout - seemingly quite energized by the world premiere status of the event.** I have heard them better in individual pieces, but as a program this has to rank as one of their best efforts.