

CONCERTS EVERYWHERE

Kernis: Flute Concerto
(World Premiere)
Detroit Symphony

Although Music Director Leonard Slatkin deserves huge credit for leading the Detroit Symphony through a difficult 2010 strike and rebuilding the ensemble from the ground up, one really has to wonder if he's still enjoying himself. Now 71, Slatkin was (and remains) an exceptional talent from a proud musical family. However, his recent work in Detroit has been uninspired and his programming has been erratic. But on January 21 he created a program that appeared to play to the orchestra's strengths and proved largely satisfying.

The major attractions on this program were clearly two concertos. John Williams's Trumpet Concerto (1996) has some terrific solo writing for the instrument, and Hunter Eberly played with tremendous confidence and a full, appealing tone. As principal trumpet, his rapport with the conductor and orchestra was never in doubt. This performance, recorded as part of the Detroit Symphony's partnership with Naxos, was played with great energy. Unfortunately, the work itself is a flawed one. John Williams is still an outstanding and creative composer, but his best work is in the movie theatre. Certainly there's no questioning his mastery of orchestration; but, aside from the solo line, there's not much that's memorable. Of course, it was fun to hear echoes of the great Williams film scores; but, in an effort to distance himself from the cinema, the composer simply appeared uninspired.

On the other hand, Aaron Jay Kernis's work is almost always interesting, and his new Flute Concerto is no exception. (He can be a quirky composer; he once wrote a concerto for toy piano and orchestra and has a number of varied musical influences.) This was written for flutist Marina Piccinini, and she played it with absolutely breath-



Hunter Eberly



taking virtuosity. Not only does Kernis understand fully her interpretive capabilities (she made sounds on the instrument I didn't know were possible, and certainly didn't know I would like), but she clearly relished the huge expressive range the work allowed her to explore.

Kernis's notes on the piece split the work into light and dark, and, while I'm not a huge fan of modern program music, I have to admit this worked very well. This was partly because of the nature of the flute. A concerto with nothing but pretty sounds and rapid runs tires the ear quickly, but I give Kernis credit for engaging me for nearly 25 minutes. Aside from a few moments when the orchestra swamped the flute, the Detroit players captured the moods and flavors of the piece very well.

The program also had two popular French orchestral works. Nothing about the "greatest hits" hodgepodge from Bizet's Carmen was particularly special. The woodwinds and strings did make some memorable solo turns, but the big moments fell a little flat. Ravel's Bolero made a stronger impression with Slatkin building the piece impressively and the soloists showing off. Audience response was enthusiastic at the close, though neither concerto was universally applauded earlier. Nonetheless, the concertos were the real heart of a rather odd program.

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