

Buffalo News

BPO brings June in Buffalo to fitting close

By Daniel J. Kushner

News Contributing Reviewer

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The closing event of this year's contemporary classical music festival June in Buffalo brought a sizable audience Sunday for a wonderful rarity—the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and its music director, JoAnn Falletta, putting on a performance devoted entirely to living American composers.

The afternoon concert — which took place in Lippes Concert Hall on University at Buffalo's North Campus — opened with "Incendio" (2000), a work for brass decet by composer David Felder, the artistic director of June in Buffalo since 1985.

This iteration of the composition featured 12 members of the BPO and began with the overlapping melodies of a French horn and trumpet. The muted tones were gradually joined by additional voices, as a palpable exasperation escalated inexorably toward discontent. A concise yet potent composition, the emotional futility and resignation of Incendio comes off as a tragic counterargument to the optimism and empowerment of Aaron Copland's brass-centric "Fanfare for the Common Man."

Similarly, Fred Lerdahl's "Cross-Currents" (1987) began with a prominent French horn melody, with a sweeping lyricism that took on an ominous character in light of the discordant strings that swelled underneath it. As the piece progressed, the composer continued to feature instruments seemingly at cross-purposes. "Jeu de Timbres," by Steven Stucky, was written in 2003 as a kind of ode to French composers Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. With emphatic and crystalline conducting by Falletta, the orchestra permeated the air with expectancy, from the bold punctuations of brass to the shimmering of strings, giving the welcome illusion of surround sound in the buoyant acoustics of the concert hall.

Following a brief intermission, the program concluded with Robert Beaser's "Guitar Concerto" from 2009, featuring guitarist Eliot Fisk. In the first movement, called "Chains and Hammers," the orchestration was particularly grandiose, with solo guitar interludes that showcased the inherent intimacy of the instrument. Beaser brought a thoroughly postmodern sensibility here, imbuing familiar strumming technique with jagged rhythms, and injecting customary picking with idiosyncratic melodic movement.

Evocative of canonic guitar repertoire, yet counterintuitive in its execution, the beautiful and unsettling music contained glimpses of tango, folk and rock.

In the second movement, "Tombeau," Beaser played with the listener's sense of scale, honing in on the solitary ruminations of Fisk's guitar, only to abruptly zoom out on the majestic sounds of the full orchestra. The compositional style was at times incredibly populist, a tendency Beaser subverted with refreshingly abstract and disjointed motives in the guitar.

Unfortunately, *Guitar Concerto* faltered when the orchestral architecture succumbed to convention in the third movement, "Phrygian Pick." The inventive counterpoint and shifting accompaniment in the orchestra that had balanced the dazzling guitar work in the first two movements was abandoned in the finale, in favor of more straightforward harmonic support of the guitar. The close of the concerto was decidedly disappointing, as the promising risks taken earlier in the piece were not rewarded with a less traditional ending.

In its totality, the concert was cohesive and potent, featuring composers at the height of their respective gifts. In all four works, the potential of lush romanticism achieved amid near cacophony was realized, and the BPO's interpretations were firm and inspired.

Concert Review

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Part of June in Buffalo with Music Director JoAnn Falletta. Sunday afternoon in the University at Buffalo Lippes Concert Hall on the North Campus, Amherst.