

'Made in America' -- Maestro Palmer's, LSO's mark of excellence

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Special to the Journal & Courier

In 1921, the U.S. government decreed that items imported into this country must be stamped with the country of origin. This meant that each country must identify its products with a "Made in ..." stamp. Even America had to comply and it became a point of pride that "Made in America" meant a certain level of excellence.

That didn't exactly apply to music although you couldn't tell from the Lafayette Symphony's "Made in America" signature on Saturday's concert at Long Center. A sampling of musical composition, mostly from the 20th century, filled a bill with familiar composers with some almost equally familiar music.

Maestro Nicholas Palmer fronted the orchestra in his easy, elegant manner and the audience was delighted.

Opening with a somewhat unfamiliar "Jubilee" by George Whitfield Chadwick, we noted the somewhat Romantic influences of his European forebearers. But this piece showed the new leanings toward the Jazz Age in the United States. While not exactly "avant garde" in its conception, it did show traces of new musical thought. The players deftly threaded their way through the chromaticism and the frequent key changes. Chadwick was a well-known composer around the turn of the 20th century ranking along with such composers as MacDowell, Fote and Parker.

Hollywood was made richer by the musical scores of Bernard Hermann. Palmer introduced each segment with clips from old movies that featured his scores. He was a friend and supporter of Alfred Hitchcock and we know what the famed suspense director required which Hermann delivered handsomely.

I recall seeing the late Martha Graham and her American Modern Dance Company perform Aaron Copland's exciting "Appalachian Spring Suite" back when it was practically new in the late 1940s.

Taking snippets of American "mountain music," Copland also chose the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" to express the joy and delight of a simple country wedding. At times the music reflects the rich, almost bawdy joy of a Breughel painting while the final section is a quiet study in what we assume to be the settling down of the young couple into their early wedded bliss.

Taking a distinctly patriotic turn was the featured narrator of "Lincoln Portrait," also by Copland, beautifully read by famed radio commentator John Hultman, a not-so-recent Purdue University graduate. His expressive reading of the words of old Abe were inspired and inspiring while Copland's vintage score provided a stirring background.

One almost expected to see Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron bound on to the stage with the playing of Gershwin's taut, pictorial movie score of "American In Paris." The familiar themes with their American jazzy feel were pleasantly recalled.

Palmer took a few liberties with the score, namely in the slower tempo of the secondary theme. His slow "andante" gave a feeling of a bluesy, moody jazz which recalled a pair of adagio dancers in one "boy beats girl" style of movement.

The final section wanders a bit in its development giving the impression that the composer was lost in the streets of Paris and gamely trying to find his way to a final cadence but the resolution is exciting and the audience stood and showed its appreciation fully.

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