

Minnesota Orchestra presents rousing program of American music

Review: Steve Heitzeg is among the new American composers at heart of Minnesota Orchestra concert.

By **Michael Anthony** Special to the Star Tribune | APRIL 30, 2015 — 7:00PM

It's odd, and maybe a bit depressing, when a major American symphony orchestra puts on a program of American music and presents it as a novelty, as the Minnesota Orchestra is doing in its subscription series this week.

Does the Berlin Philharmonic present during its season a week of German music with the idea that this is a bold — possibly even risky — venture? Probably not, since German repertoire figures prominently in nearly all the Philharmonic's programs. This is an old complaint, of course, but American orchestras still have a ways to go in recognizing native talent.

Certainly the native talent on display at Orchestra Hall Thursday morning was varied and impressive. The program titled "American Voices," possibly the most interesting of the entire season so far, included the premiere of an intriguing trumpet concerto by Minnesota composer Steve Heitzeg and a performance by the orchestra's former principal clarinet, Burt Hara. ("American Voices" will continue next week with a choral program led by Eric Whitacre.)

Heitzeg's concerto, which received an immediate and rousing ovation, is so good that one is led to predict it will be played by numerous orchestras around the country. Whether those performances will have a soloist as accomplished as the one here, orchestra trumpeter Charles Lazarus — one so skilled at improvisation — is another matter.

Titled "American Nomad," Heitzeg's concerto is partly a travelogue that moves from New York City to the Pacific Ocean, with stops along the way, and partly a rumination on the American spirit: its exuberance, its loneliness, its medley of cultures, its restless ambition and grandiosity.

The first of its three movements, "Avenue of the Americas (for those who are without a home)," has a vividly rhythmic, dance-at-the-gym character with layers of percussion and a weird interlude that suggests ghosts walking through the woods.

The middle movement, "Little Hymn to the Fields," is soft and wistful, beautifully scored for strings and muted trumpet. The finale, "Trip (Where the Chords Have No Name)," is a rush of energy and ambiguous optimism that included a spectacularly funky blues solo by Lazarus, whose gleaming tone gave sparkle to the entire piece.

Hara, a member of this orchestra for 25 years before joining the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2013 and a much revered player here, brought subtle phrasings and sly rhythmic sophistication to Copland's Concerto for Clarinet, following that with Saint-Saens' "The Swan" as an encore.

Mischa Santora, the orchestra's much respected former associate conductor, opened the program with Leonard Bernstein's witty — and seldom heard — Divertimento for Orchestra. The perfect finale was Judd Greenstein's extravagant and exciting "Acadia" — call it John Adams meets Richard Wagner — a work premiered in the orchestra's "Inside the Classics" series in 2012.

Michael Anthony is a Minneapolis writer

American Voices

What: Mischa Santora conducting the Minnesota Orchestra, with clarinetist Burt Hara and trumpeter Charles Lazarus as soloists.

When: 8 p.m. Friday.

Where: Orchestra Hall, 1111 Nicollet Mall.

Tickets: \$29-\$96. 612-371-5656.