

## “Classical Exploration” from Youngstown Symphony (Jan. 29)

by Kevin McLaughlin



With a glint of polished silver and a showman’s flair, trumpet soloist Brian Neal highlighted the Youngstown Symphony’s Classical Exploration concert on January 29 at Stambaugh Auditorium with a stirring performance of Joseph Haydn’s *Trumpet Concerto in E-flat*.

As the orchestra continues to search for a permanent conductor to replace the late Randall Craig Fleisher, Alberto Bade, a colleague of Neal’s at Miami Dade College, led the orchestra in a program that also included fine performances of Richard Strauss’ *Don Juan*, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s “Danse Nègre,” and Antonín Dvořák’s always well-received *Symphony No. 9*, “From the New World.”

Bade took a few minutes at the start to introduce the program with familiarizing “stories” behind each piece. This included a few of the character of Don Juan’s slightly PG antics (though Bade’s teacher, Gerard Schwarz, had warned him against doing so). No harm done, since these tidbits seemed to sharpen the audience’s focus, as they were surely designed to do.

The famously difficult tone poem found its match in Bade and the orchestra. Strauss’s musical portrait of the libertine, based on the version written by Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau (who, we learned from the interesting program notes, lived briefly in Ohio during the 1830s), was well-served by every section of the YSO. A lovely solo by principal oboe

Cynthia Watson stood out, as did Andrew Pongracz's tasteful percussion work, which rightly warranted a bow at the end.

It was nice to hear the seldom-performed "Danse Nègre" from Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *African Suite*. Like Dvořák, Coleridge-Taylor sought to integrate folk music into his compositions, and here he spins out a series of country jigs, original to him. It is charming music, and the orchestra gave a suitably appealing performance.

Trumpeter Brian Neal gave a fine reading of Haydn's elegant concerto to close the first half. He knocked off the tricky trills and technical passages with ease and a remarkably warm, singing tone reminiscent of his teacher, the late, great Rolf Smedvig. Three cadenzas — one in each movement — may have been a bit much, but Smedvig would have approved, and maybe Haydn too. The audience certainly responded, with nods and applause between movements as well as a heartfelt standing ovation at the end.

One of Bade's pre-concert morsels was about the instrument for which Haydn composed this 1796 concerto: a new, keyed invention allowing for mid- and lower-range cantabile melodies, contrary to the fanfare-only repertoire of its predecessors. So, a bolt of irony then, when at the start of the second movement Neal was forced to stop playing to attend to some sticking valves. Alas, what technology giveth, it may at any moment taketh away.

The second half's "New World Symphony" overcame its tendency to sound hackneyed by containing moments of real excitement. The orchestral tutti at the end of the first movement, for example, reached such heights as to elicit an audible gasp from the audience. The horn solos from Deb McDowell-Jenness and Heather Johnson in the opening Allegro contributed a welcome sense of drive, and the superbly played flute solos from Tara Yaney reminded us of Dvořák's melodic potency.

The second-movement Largo showed off English hornist Adrian Gonzales in the "Goin' Home" solos. His tone, haloed by a warm vibrato, conveyed a sense of communal wistfulness. The Scherzo purred along, with Dvořák exploring dances of his native Bohemia. Highlights included excellent wind playing and crisp triangle solos. And the last movement sounded suitably noble and urgent. A couple of tentative entrances in the strings due to some inexact conducting took things off the tracks slightly, but on the whole, the Stambaugh audience was treated to a "New World" with equal parts vigor and nostalgia.

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