

Review: Spartanburg Philharmonic performs moving tribute to 9/11 fallen heroes

By CHRISTOPHER VANEMAN

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What's an orchestra for, anyway? In this day and age, when a near-infinite variety of entertainment options is piped into our homes and is available at the click of a button, what purpose does a philharmonic serve? And in the current economic climate, can a community as small as Spartanburg possibly justify having an orchestra of its very own?

The Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra offered a resounding and powerful answer to those questions in a moving concert Saturday at Converse College's Twichell Auditorium. Titled "Heroes and Legends," the program offered tribute both to the fallen heroes of 9/11 and to veterans and first responders in and around Spartanburg. And in the varied nature of the tributes offered, the orchestra and its music director, Sarah Ioannides, offered compelling proof of the value and importance of an orchestra.

Orchestras, the concert proved, are uniquely positioned to do three things. They offer us access to a great and living tradition, to some of the best music not just of the past few decades, but of the past few centuries. They can offer us a chance to advance that tradition into the future by creating new music that reflects our own concerns and aspirations. And, finally and perhaps most importantly, they reinforce our own community's ideals and give us a unique chance to pass them on from generation to generation. Orchestras around the world routinely do the first two, but Ioannides and the Philharmonic deserve celebration for their commitment to the last one, to ensuring that this orchestra is ours, that it both reflects and helps bind together the Spartanburg community.

Most concerts, of course, begin with music. This one began with a brief meditation by the Rev. Dr. Kirk Neely on the redeeming power of love, and Rev. Neely's words set the tone for all that was to follow. Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," written in 1942 to encourage an America that was newly at war, was the program's first piece, and its heroic vigor was followed by Maurice Ravel's delicate and nostalgic "Pavane for a Dead Princess." In addition to giving audiences another chance to appreciate the burnished tone and unwavering consistency of principal hornist Anneka Zuehlke, the Ravel piece set up what was undoubtedly the main dish on Saturday's menu, the world premiere of Kenneth Fuchs' remarkable work "Falling Man."



Michael Justus/michael.justus@shj.com

A choir made up of local first responders sing with the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra and the Spartanburg Chorus Saturday at a 9/11-themed concert at Twichell Auditorium.

Composers nowadays often find themselves in a bit of a bind: on the one hand, they're intrigued by the various musical possibilities in the ideas and techniques of the avant-garde composers of the 20th Century; on the other hand, many audience members find music using said ideas and techniques to be ugly and, what's worse, boring. So composers have to satisfy both their own artistic ambition (after all, if they themselves don't find their music interesting, why should they bother writing it?) and their audience (if audiences don't want to hear it, who's going to listen?).

With "Falling Man," Fuchs hits both targets squarely. The 18-minute work for baritone and orchestra sets the prologue of Don DeLillo's celebrated novel of the same name about the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, as adapted by the American poet J. D. McClatchy. Setting prose rather than poetry offers unique challenges, and Fuchs meets them by dividing the text into several smaller but thematically-related arias which are linked by orchestral interludes. The vocalist's speech-like rhythms and 12-tone melody are expanded, colored, and sometimes interrupted by orchestral interjections of great beauty and power and no small difficulty.

The evening's soloist, baritone James Maddalena, is among the world's most prominent singers of contemporary opera, so it was little surprise that he was magnificent; his fine diction, paired with Twichell's remarkable acoustics, ensured that every syllable of text projected throughout the auditorium. Under the sure hand of Ioannides the orchestra was just about as magnificent, handling a fiercely difficult score with aplomb throughout the ensemble.

If the program's first half engaged musical tradition and pushed it forward as it responded to the tragedy of 9/11, its second half was all about community. The Spartanburg First Responders Choir, uniformed men and women from our local police and fire departments and EMS personnel, joined the Spartanburg Festival Chorus in paying heartfelt tribute to servicemen and -women, first responders, and veterans here and throughout the country. As the audience spontaneously burst into warm applause for veterans as they and their families stood for the playing of each service's anthem, one couldn't help but think: "This is us. This is who we are, as a community, and the orchestra is reminding us what, in the end, is truly important."

All these thoughts were perfectly crystallized (in a much lighter kind of way) by the concert's encore, which featured the debut of a new conducting talent, Spartanburg's own Sam Evins. Young Evins eschewed the stodgy white-tie-and-tails look in favor of the jaunty versatility of a Webelos uniform, and, with a negligible amount of coaching from Ioannides, led the orchestra in a rousing "Stars and Stripes Forever." It was our town, past, present, and future, rolled up with a great musical tradition. And it was pretty neat.

Christopher Vaneman is associate professor of flute and musicology at Converse College's Petrie School of Music and president of the South Carolina Flute Society.

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