



ARTS & CULTURE

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How do you save Mount Rainier? Symphony Tacoma, Museum of Glass hope to do so with music

BY ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI

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It was an unusual party of snowshoers that set out from Paradise on Wednesday.

Around 38 orchestra students from Lincoln High School — most of whom had never been up Mount Rainier — were joined by a climatologist, a composer, a conductor, park rangers and a symphony violinist, who is their orchestra teacher. The goal? To discover how classical music can help save our environment in the form of a brand-new piece premiering Saturday with Symphony Tacoma.

“‘Fire Mountain’ is calling to attention the dangers of climate change,” says Daniel Ott, the composer in the snowshoeing group, of the choral symphonic work that Symphony Tacoma commissioned him to write for the concert “Mountain and Sea.”

“Most people are aware of it, but this (music) brings a more personal note for the people in the region. The mountain, which is always there ... is jeopardized. It’s not always going to be the same place we know and love.”

Ott, a New York composer on the faculties of Juilliard School and Fordham University, is talking about Mount Rainier’s melting glaciers. Having grown up in Puyallup, he knows the relationship Puget Sound residents have to the mountain — and as a composer, he knows the power of music to make you think and feel.

So does Sarah Ioannides, director of Symphony Tacoma, who came up with the idea for “Mountain and Sea,” a concert that sets Ott’s new work in the context of two more familiar classical landscape pieces: Grieg’s “Peer Gynt” Suite No. 1 (including the famous “Hall of the

Mountain King”) and Debussy’s lush tone poem “La Mer (The Sea).” Supported partly by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the work is also a collaboration with the National Parks Service to honor its centenary.



THE GOAL IS TO EXPRESS THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL WARMING, AND WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE. -

Sarah Ioannides, Symphony Tacoma director, on their new work “Fire Mountain”

“The goal is to express the challenges of global warming and what needs to be done,” she says. “It feels even more poignant with the current government. ... If there were a mass movement (in music) to express our feelings on this, more people would become aware that it’s an important subject.”

Ott’s 14-minute piece does more than just express feelings, it captures the very nature of the mountain, just as Debussy painted swirling surges of water with notes in “La Mer.” It opens with a whooshing sound of wind, created by exhalations from the choir that surge from stage right to left, and are echoed by the same sound produced by bowing lightly over violin strings dampened by a finger. The piece gradually builds, with a rising, uneasy melody introduced by the flute and then played by staggered strings, like far-off mountain echoes. There’s grandeur in the brass chords, small-creature scurrying in upper strings, snow flurries in upper winds, and a blast of volcanic fire at the climax that resolves menacingly into melting-glacier glissando slides and finally wisps of evaporating steam in the strings.

With climbing mountain-shaped phrases, the choir sings a quote from naturalist John Muir: “Of all the fire-mountains which, like beacons, once blazed along the Pacific Coast, Mount Rainier is the noblest.”

In fact, points out Ott, “the actual physical shape of the mountain makes up the form of the piece ... with initial climax and big climax (like) the second peak and main summit.”

The work will play in synch with a specially-made video by the Museum of Glass that combines views of the mountain with shots of molten glass that symbolize the fire inside this Northwest volcano.

“I love the mountain,” says Ott. “It’s even more special because you only see it completely once or twice a year, when ‘the mountain is out.’ I’ve gone up many times over the years, tubing, hiking around, school trips. My in-laws have a glorious view from their house.”

Which is why Ott was glad of the chance to write a piece highlighting how Mount Rainier is threatened by climate change and to show the young musicians at Lincoln High — and the rest of us — how classical music can engage with vital world issues.

“My hope is that it brings the idea that classical music is not just music composed between 1700 and 1900,” Ott says. “It’s a living, breathing art form, and doesn’t have to sound like what you think classical music should sound like. It’s not just Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, much as I love them. It can talk about what’s going on in our lives.”

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MOUNTAIN AND SEA

Who: Symphony Tacoma and chorus, directed by Sarah Ioannides, with Museum of Glass.

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Pantages Theater, 901 Broadway, Tacoma.

Tickets: \$19-\$80.

Information: 253-272-7264, symphonytacoma.org; 253-591-5894, broadwaycenter.org.



Musicians from Symphony Tacoma play in the balcony of the Museum of Glass Hot Shop. **Beth Buelow** - Courtesy

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