



Symphony, Cotuit center join for music-theater show

Thursday

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A first-ever collaboration between Cape Symphony and Cotuit Center for the Arts revives a 40-year-old play that questions reality and has an orchestra as a character.

By Keith Powers / Contributing Writer

Jung-Ho Pak, artistic director and conductor of Cape Symphony Orchestra, is fond of saying that he is "constantly trying to redefine the idea of what the symphony can become."

So now, he's putting the entire orchestra inside of someone's mind.

At least that's what will be happening in in the play "**Every Good Boy Deserves Favor**," a joint music and theater presentation that is part of the "Shostakovich Triumphant" program taking place Saturday and Sunday. In the play, a schizophrenic prisoner believes that he commands a symphony orchestra in his brain.

Pak has help in creating this unusual situation. From composer André Previn and playwright Tom Stoppard, for starters, who created the 1977 music/theater collaboration, but also from David Kuehn, executive director at the Cotuit Center for the Arts.

Pak will bring the symphony orchestra required by the piece; the actors will come from the Cotuit center. They will meet on the Barnstable High School Performing Arts Center stage for two performances of this rarely seen musical drama.

Pak first floated the idea with Kuehn years ago: "I think it was six or seven years ago," Kuehn says, "and every time our paths crossed, we brought it up."

The show is finally being staged, and not only that, this joint production was the catalyst for the entire ArtSpring Cape Cod extravaganza, continuing through this weekend all over the Cape.

"It was the stake in the ground," Kuehn says. "We decided to build a theme around this, and that's how it started."

The 10-day festival's theme has been freedom of expression, and Pak believes this 40-year-old piece remains relevant. "I think we're living in a surreal time," he says. "The play questions reality, just as we are questioning it right now."

"EGBDF" skewers the oppressive Soviet-era practice of placing dissenters into mental hospitals. A political prisoner shares a cell with a schizophrenic, the one who believes that he commands a symphony orchestra in his mind. The prisoner, Ivanov, is supposed to remain incarcerated until he confesses to his "disease."

Given the forces required, the work is rarely performed. "It's been on my bucket list for 15 or 20 years," Pak says.

"I stumbled across the piece, and just conceptually it has an intriguing title, and the idea that it has an orchestra and actors together on stage also intrigued me.

"Half the goal in any symphony performance is trying to get the musicians to understand that we are actors," he says. "We are the court musicians, we are the town musicians, trying to bring these composers to life. So often we feel like a vending machine, churning out different composers.

"In this project, the theatrical element is very exciting, and helps redefine what it means to be musicians."

Transport yourself back to the 1970s, and you're in the middle of Cold War-era feelings, when dissident depictions of Soviet actions were harrowing and very real. It was still the time of Shostakovich (who died in 1975), and Pak is pairing this performance with Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony.

"Previn's score is reminiscent of Shostakovich, but also kind of post-Straussian as well," he says. "It's been a dream of mine to pair these two pieces together."

The orchestra probably won't be wearing greasepaint, but they are part of the drama. "To call it acting would be a generous term," Pak says. "Although they are a character on stage. And a key ingredient in underlining the absurdity of what's going on. They see everything, but they have no direct influence. They are inside the mind of the dissident's cellmate.

"It's kind of like 'Harvey,' with Jimmy Stewart," he adds, referring to the 1950 movie in which Stewart's character sees a giant rabbit invisible to everyone else. "Only the audience and this crazy guy see the orchestra."

Mary Arnault directs "EGBDF." "It's pretty straightforward," Kuehn says, "with six actors, and simple costumes, lighting and sound. What makes it complicated is that we really have one rehearsal with the orchestra, to make sure we get the miking right and the staging done.

"The music is gorgeous," he says, "it's funny and accessible. There's a lot of humor in an absurdist way – humor, satire, and sarcasm, so many layers."

And a bonus for the symphony members: "Lots of inside jokes for the musicians."

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