

Cynthia...

By Keith Powers

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With summer just around the corner, it may be hard to think of a little life snuffed out by freezing winter weather.

Composer Conrad Pope will take you there this weekend though. With help from Hans Christian Andersen, the Cambridge Symphony Orchestra, and conductor Cynthia Woods.

Pope has set Andersen's heartbreaking tale "The Little Match Girl" as a tone poem for orchestra, and the world premiere is set for this Saturday evening at MIT's Kresge Auditorium.

Woods, a Somerville resident, has worked with Pope for many years. "Conrad has such a way of connecting sound with imagery," she says. "When you hear this, you just want to know more and more about the characters."

The story of a homeless girl, futilely trying to sell her matches on the street and perishing in the attempt, is so heartrending that parents are often ambivalent about reading it to their kids. Woods herself says, "even as a child, I knew there were really scared children, on their own, on the streets."

The vividness of the tale makes a worthy subject for Pope's tone poem, which runs for one movement, about a half-hour long, but "will take place in several episodes, following her through the course of the day.

"You hear her walking through the snow - in fact the sound of snow falling runs throughout the piece," Woods says. "You hear the snowball fight, and see the old man get hit in the face. The story gets updated - there's a car involved, instead of a buggy. But you really follow the narrative. It is a tragedy: she becomes invisible, because there's no people in her life that love her."

Pope is a well-known film composer, having contributed to scores for "The Matrix" films, the final two "Hobbit" movies, "Pirates of the Caribbean," the "Indiana Jones" projects, and many others.

“I met Conrad at a conductor’s workshop,” Woods says, “at Hartt School in Hartford. We hit it off. I was incredibly impressed with his craftsmanship. I’ve worked with many new music scores, and in a lot of ways you don’t know what you’re missing until it’s there in front of you.

“This score is easy to play, and the players got it right away. It may sound simple, but when he writes an oboe solo, it sounds like it belongs in the oboe. It just makes everything that much easier.”

Pope’s commission gets paired on the season-ending program with Aaron Copland’s third symphony, the bold and optimistic work that climaxes with the theme from his “Fanfare for the Common Man.”

“I feel like Copland created this beautiful language of American music,” Woods says. “I’ve built the whole season around American composers and Americana, and I wanted Conrad’s commission to be part of that.

“I also did it for my orchestra,” she says. “I wanted to get those perfect 4ths and 5ths, that open resonance - the sound of American music - into their heads.

“I’ve wanted to do the Copland symphony for years,” she says. “To me, it’s one of the greatest American works. It sounds like what I would imagine walking down the street on the best day of your life would sound.”

Cambridge Symphony Orchestra in concert

WHEN: June 17, 8 p.m.

WHERE: Kresge Auditorium at MIT, 48 Mass. Ave., Cambridge

TICKETS: \$15-\$25

INFO: 844-276-4634; www.cambridgesymphony.org

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