

# Entropia mixes a rock ‘n’ roll electric bass with a conventional symphony orchestra

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By Keith Powers

Contributing Writer

The concerto might be a composer’s most flexible genre. A soloist, pitted against an entire orchestra. They can compete. They can discuss. They can dance together. They can engage in combat.

Finnish composer Lauri Porra chose all the possibilities. His concerto project, “Entropia,” performed Nov. 26 by the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra in the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center, matches rock ‘n’ roll’s groove instrument—the electric bass, played by Porra—with a conventional orchestra.

The highly unlikely pairing offered many things to enjoy. While it may not have taken advantage of all the musical possibilities available from the five dozen or so talented orchestral musicians onstage, it certainly showed off the skills of the composer and soloist, who successfully re-imagined his instrument—known basically as a back-of-the-stage foundation for a rock rhythm section—into a sweet sounding solo vehicle.

In “Entropia,” Porra deftly imagines the possibilities of order and disorder, as entropy does. In his example, disorder first might occur when mixing hot and cold water; but soon warm water is achieved. So too does his concerto find order, contrasting an amplified electronic instrument, played solo, with the acoustic amalgam of strings, horns, winds and percussion.

Especially percussion. The centerpiece of Porra’s four-section concerto is the third movement, highlighted by an improvisational breakdown between the percussion section and the soloist. That brings about the entropic chaos, and the resulting return to stability—the sweet sounding, arpeggiated chords of the final movement—takes the work to a contemplative place.

The orchestral writing for “Entropia” may have not had the deepest intricacy; most of the time the strings played those unison, sweeping phrases that are sounded when a rock band hires a string orchestra to provide atmosphere.

But a hoedown solo for concertmaster Jesse Holstein—played with rock-star fervor—and tender moments in the winds and horns in the finale, showed that Porra does have the melodic touch.

If the main response to “Entropia” was surprise that Porra actually made it work, his encore definitely left the audience feeling warm and fulfilled. He improvised on the famous composition of his great grandfather — the legendary Jean Sibelius — his anthemic “Finlandia.”

It was sweetly and lovingly invoked. When, at the cadence, Porra modulated to a few measures of “America the Beautiful” — our own equivalent of “Finlandia,” not an official anthem, but certainly a point of national pride — a wave of enchantment swept through the hall.

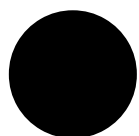
The Sibelius-themed program concluded with that composer’s first symphony after intermission. Long associated with feelings of Finnish nationalism—Porra mentioned that this is the centenary of Finland’s independence from Russia — Sibelius’s first symphony stands apart from any programmatic intentions.

It’s an elegant, balanced work, carefully crafted in four interesting movements. The finale — a fantasia, with half-a-dozen alternating sections of fast and slow, some recalling earlier themes, some breaking new musical ground — is especially appealing.

Principal Margo McGowan’s long, beautifully crafted opening solo gathers up nearly all the themes and musical ideas that follow. Partly tragic, partly sweet, the symphony also bears some feeling of a pastorate—as does much of Sibelius’s music.

NBSO music director Yaniv Dinur kept the beat firm and unwavering. One wished for more freedom from the podium—the orchestra played beautifully, and the symphony, while alluring and dynamic, is hardly the most difficult in the repertory. A little more expressive energy might have brightened up the performance.

*The NBSO’s next performance will be its Holiday Pops concerts on Saturday, Dec. 16 at 3:30 and 7:30 p.m. in the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center. For information and tickets visit [www.nbsymphony.org](http://www.nbsymphony.org) or call the Z box office at 508-994-2900.*



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