

NBSO ends season with crowd-pleasing movie music

Thursday

Posted at 2:01 AM

By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

This was a memorable season for the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, and the finale Saturday evening at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center celebrated it in style.

The 100th anniversary is now in the books. A new music director — Yaniv Dinur — has now been selected after a year-long audition of candidates. A major fundraising campaign is underway.

So the NBSO went to the movies.

With esteemed guest conductor Ken-David Masur leading the orchestra, the NBSO performed film music of John Williams in its season-closing concert. The Z was sold out, a tribute to Williams' popularity, but also to the orchestra's heady successes of late.

Masur, the son of the great German conductor Kurt Masur, has established his own place among the top young conductors working today. His tenure as associate at the Boston Symphony Orchestra has grown into a continued contract as assistant conductor. He is among the candidates to take over as music director at the Rhode Island Philharmonic. He runs, along with his wife, pianist Melinda Lee Masur, the Chelsea Music Festival in New York each summer. He has guest conducted widely in Europe and America.

Masur stuck with some of the most popular of Williams' film scores for this program — and there's a lot to choose from. Williams' music has received 50 Academy Award nominations, countless Grammy Awards and is recognizable to generations of moviegoers all around the globe. Not to mention his scoring for the Olympics, for television, for presidential inaugurations — and his symphonic music as well.

Many of the most popular film scores have been arranged into suites for concert performance, and among the ones that Masur chose came from films like “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” “Jurassic Park,” “E.T.,” “Jaws,” “Harry Potter,” and “Star Wars.”

The program was accessible and colorful, an appropriate season-ending celebration.

Film music serves the images and the action it accompanies. At its best, what it sacrifices in complexity it makes up for in color, tension and melody. In Williams’ hands, most of these melodies are simple, but unforgettable.

Like the famous two-note ostinato that everyone knows as the scare-theme from “Jaws” — and still remembers, more than 40 years after that film came out. Or similarly unforgettable snippets from “Harry Potter” and “Star Wars.”

What you don’t expect from a concert version of film music is the development, the cohesion that comes from hearing the composer’s original intentions for the music — not the final, crisply edited version that obediently follows the action.

One example was the arranged suite from the recent film “Big Friendly Giant.” A tapestry of complexities and interaction, wrapped up with a slightly off-the-beat solo from principal flute Vanessa Holroyd, it showed that under the simple swells and dramatic tension we hear in films, there lies a musical sophistication at the root of it all.

Most of the music served its master — action. There were almost always hummable tunes. Major keys, broadly grand gestures, frequent use of horns and percussion, unison string playing — these characteristics could be used to describe almost all the music.

Williams uses the entire orchestra, that’s for certain, and this was the largest ensemble the NBSO had assembled in recent memory.

More than a dozen brass and horns lined the back of the stage, and their importance and bright playing were acknowledged with frequent bows. Likewise the five active percussionists.

The wind section had an utterly beautiful ensemble solo during the Sorcerer’s Stone Suite — one of the few times the musical energy was restrained, not triumphantly forceful. Masur conducted carefully, with attention to the details — a sure sign of the respect he holds for the music and its composer.

The completely sold-out hall — with kids everywhere — showed that there is an audience for symphonic music that transcends the typical concert-going regulars. That audience resides on the fringes of the standard repertory, for sure, but it is most assuredly there. And ready to enjoy alert, accessible performances like this one.

This is the final program of the NBSO's 2016–17 season.

The orchestra's summer fundraiser, Symphony Seaside Swing, will be June 3 at the Kittansett Club in Marion. For tickets and information visit www.nbsymphony.org or call 508-979-6276.

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