

NBSO rises to Dinur's challenge in season opener

By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

Posted at 3:01 AM

If first impressions are anything to go by, the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra will be working very hard under new music director Yaniv Dinur.

In a bracing opening night program Saturday evening at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center, Dinur challenged his players with an African-percussion inspired overture, a virtuosic violin concerto, and one of the seminal orchestral tests of the repertory. The results were not uniformly successful, but there was brilliant playing all evening—and the hopes for future rewards in this new partnership run high.

Derek Bermel's helter-skelter "Dust Dances" is based on a western African percussion tradition. Bermel's work explores folk melodies in a pentatonic scale, with percussion and horns layering polyrhythmic flavors over more traditional string playing.

Dinur largely led the strings, and let his back-of-the-stage musicians add their colors. The result was a noisy confection, with apparently lots of guess-work going on throughout the orchestra.

Leonard Bernstein arrived to set things straight. Not with any simple tunes or straightforward music, mind you — his "Serenade, after Plato's Symposium," is as difficult a violin concerto as you can find.

The music world celebrates Bernstein's centenary (born 1918) this season, and the fact that many orchestras are programming his compositions is a good thing. Daniel Chong, first violinist of the Parker Quartet, joined the NBSO as soloist.

Just memorizing this work is challenge enough. With five movements, which to Bernstein's mind represent various Socratic dialogues between noted Greek playwrights and philosophers, the composer has created a unique concerto that abandons traditional forms, and vigorously explores the possibilities between soloist and ensemble.

Chong played beautifully. Each of the movements aims to recreate some aspect of Plato's thoughts, being discussed in Socratic, give-and-take fashion. That sometimes occurs as banter between soloist and orchestra, as in the scherzo-like third movement. Sometimes as soloist in duets, as in a short exchange between Chong and concertmaster Jesse Holstein in the gorgeous, languid fourth movement. Or again in the opening of the finale, in an exchange with cellist Shay Rudolph.

The orchestra sounded particularly well prepared, and Chong blazed through some truly difficult music. He stood out especially in a challenging cadenza, set in the fourth movement. Barely a melody — all gesture, full of double-stops and challenging intervals — Chong carved it out of almost nothing, making complete sense of the thorny passage, and providing context to the audience.

All the Mahler symphonies are journeys. In fact, each movement of each symphony takes a journey. The evening closed with Mahler's First, nicknamed the Titan, and it was Dinur's turn to impress with memory — conducting the hour-long work without the score.

Offstage horns in the opening moments signal the fact that Mahler's ideas travel far. Fragmented bird-calls, fanfares and bits of melody blend in a unique movement that has hints of pastorage, and builds to a sturdy climax.

The second movement, evoking a country dance (the Ländler) similar to a waltz, was played with confidence and charm. It's a scherzo, and the middle trio section keeps the dance-like quality, but shifts the mood delicately to introspection.

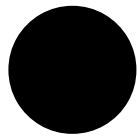
The third movement is nothing if not eerie. Alert listeners may have heard the round we know as "Frère Jacques" — but in a minor mode, originating in the solo bass (principal Reginald Lamb), and progressing through the darker instruments. The movement remains unrelentingly grim, with martial timpani beats a recurring reminder.

The finale wanders impetuously far from the home key, before finding its way back to the front door.

There were moments of musical insight throughout the performance. The horns and winds, constantly exposed in solo moments, played stoutly. There were also many moments when the orchestra seemed content simply to get to the notes of this challenging work. Like all journeys, there are some detours and wrong turns.

In the end, it was great to see the NBSO tackle such a robust program, starting off a new season — and a new era under Yaniv Dinur — with ambition and style.

The NBSO's next performance will be Nov. 26, featuring music of Sibelius and Lauri Porra, at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center. For information and tickets visit www.nbsymphony.org or call the Z box office at 508-994-2900.



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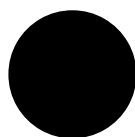
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