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REVIEW

Mark O'Connor joins CSO for uplifting concert

With the works of Copland and O'Connor, the sold-out hall was treated to an exploration of American roots as seen through the sophisticated eyes of two of our greatest composers.

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The CSO was joined by, from left, Mark O'Connor, Maggie O'Connor, Kate Lee and Forrest O'Connor on Saturday and Sunday. John David Pittman



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The CSO was joined by, from left, Mark O'Connor, Maggie O'Connor, Kate Lee and Forrest O'Connor on Saturday and Sunday. John David Pittman

In Concert

What: Cape Symphony Orchestra, with Mark O'Connor

When: performed Saturday night and Sunday afternoon

Where: Barnstable High School Performing Arts Center, H...

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By Keith Powers
Contributing writer

Posted Sep. 12, 2016 at 4:03 PM

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HYANNIS – The meaning of America extends in many directions. Many ideas of what we are infuriate. Some give solace. But, at our best, all are tolerated.

Mark O'Connor's America is historic – musically historic. The great American fiddler believes there have been many great American fiddlers before him, and through his many collaborations, compositions, teachings and explorations he has aimed to make the legacy of American violin playing more well-known.

So having O'Connor onstage with the Cape Symphony Orchestra Sunday afternoon in the Barnstable High School Performing Arts Center, in a program that remembered the 15th anniversary of 9/11 with the theme of American Storytellers, was more than fitting. It was uplifting.

It was opening weekend of the CSO season, and maestro Jung-Ho Pak included music from another great American who embraced his heritage in a personal way, Aaron Copland. With the works of Copland and O'Connor, the sold-out hall was treated to an exploration of American roots as seen through the sophisticated eyes of two of our greatest composers.

O'Connor's roots are in bluegrass – he was the youngest grand master fiddle champion ever, decades ago. But his compositional style, while never abandoning the improvisational background he grew up with, is greatly flavored with the harmonic colorings and orchestral possibilities of classical music.

His Improvised Violin Concerto, the centerpiece of this program, explores both musical directions. While O'Connor improvised his own part as soloist, the orchestra read from his score – simple, to be sure, but full of many inviting unison sections of powerful beauty.

He performed only one movement – the finale, "Faith." While the orchestra sketched out a framework, the soloist worked alone or with various instruments to concoct a bluesy, energetic feeling.

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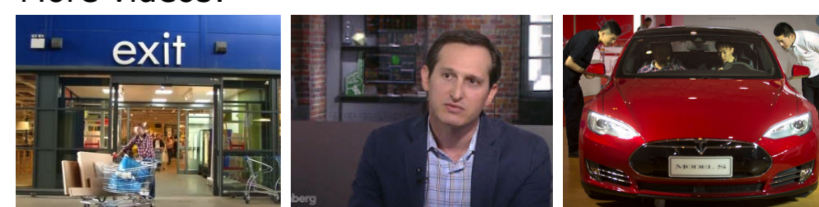


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Good balance came and went – part of the charm of the concerto is that O'Connor can play amplified or not, as he wishes. Most of the time it worked.

Before his concerto movement, O'Connor gave a solo improvisation on the familiar and compelling Shaker tune "Simple Gifts." It was a stirring moment of historic appreciation and modern interpretation, and served as a link back to several of Copland's works, including selections from his ballet "Rodeo."

Of the four movements, the gripping "Corral Nocturne" – growing rapturously from a single interval, with a beautiful lovesick duet between principals on oboe (Elizabeth Mitnick Doriss) and on flute (Zachary Sheets) – stole the moment.

O'Connor also brought his family band – son Forrest on mandolin; O'Connor's wife, Maggie, and Forrest's fiancée, Kate Lee, on fiddles for a set of selections, some from the band's debut album, "Coming Home," which sits atop the Billboard – bluegrass charts.

Other works on the program continued to mine the American tradition. O'Connor's "Johnny Appleseed Suite," originally a children's arrangement, paid tribute to that American legend. "The Promise of Living," a one-movement anthem from Copland's opera "The Tender Land," was accompanied by a film tribute to the National Park Service, celebrating its centennial. And the program began with a musical observation of the 9/11 anniversary, the uncomplicated commemorative elegy "Towers of Light," by Robert Wendel.

The Cape Symphony Orchestra next performs Oct. 8 and 9, a pops program with the duo Swearingen & Kelli. Tickets and information: www.capesymphony.org or 508-362-1111.

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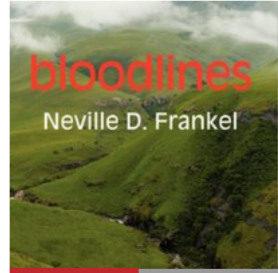
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