

MUSIC REVIEW

Jacksonville Symphony shines with new conductor

By TIM THOMPSON
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One of Florida's oldest and finest orchestras took the stage at the Kravis Center Monday night as part of the Regional Arts series. The Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, was founded in 1949, and has grown in stature over the past several years. This season marks a change for the orchestra as Brazilian-born conductor Paulo Mechiatti takes the helm. Mechiatti's résumé of conducting both orchestra and opera is impressive, and he will do very well in Jacksonville.

This ensemble has been delighting audiences in Jacksonville for many seasons, and its reputation as one of the great regional symphonic orchestras has been growing outside of Florida.

The concert opened in a way in which most symphony concerts in major artistic centers do, that is, with a new piece of music. Orchestras all over the country commission works from living composers. Most of these works will get a few performances at best because they are not the bread and butter of the orchestra. Composers feel obliged to compose short, flashy works, which can take the opening position on a program.

The opening piece, *Too Hot Toccata*, was written by 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, Aaron Jay Kernis. It was commissioned by the renowned Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra where Kernis was composer-in-residence. The overall mood is quite high-strung, but the music is so lightly textured and well-crafted that most of it seemed to flow gracefully from the instruments, with remarkable clarity.

There were a couple of spots when so much was happening that it was difficult to hear it all, but those were well counterposed by the buoyancy of the rest. This piece was heartily received by the audience, with the exception of a few who voiced displeasure.

Mechiatti and the orchestra returned to museum duties for the rest of the concert, performing late 19th-century works. The orchestra was joined by hornist Eric Ruske for Richard Strauss' *Concerto for Horn No. 1*. Ruske has had a notable career and enjoys well-deserved notoriety. His playing is both nimble and expressive, exhibiting enormous musical sensitivity. This early work of Strauss combines classic and romantic influences, and foreshadows the great orchestraling capabilities that would come to mark this composer's career. The orchestra and

soloist concerted their efforts to create a well-blended texture and an enjoyable performance.

A good orchestra concert will have a great piece of music presented in a memorable performance, and that was certainly the case when the ensemble played Antonin Dvorak's *Symphony No. 8 in G*. This work is familiar, although not as often performed in this country as the No. 9 *New World* symphony. It is a brilliant symphony, full of the folk-like tunes that characterize much of Dvorak's music. The symphony rivals those of Johannes Brahms in scope and beauty, and uses orchestral colors for regional highlights reminiscent of Bedrich Smetana.

The first movement was energetic and intense, and even brought some applause at its close. The expansive and beautiful *Adagio* followed, in which the orchestra successfully captured the depth of this mature work. The waltzlike third movement was played with the brilliance and clarity that marked most of the evening. But nothing could prepare the audience for the rich brass fanfare of the finale. The performance was truly great, with flawless woodwinds and string sections that played as uniformly and expressively as any I have heard. The audience gave an abnormally long ovation for this venue, bringing Mechiatti back out several times, and earning an encore. The piece was the *Overture to Russian and Lullaby* by Michael Glinka, and it was played with fervor and flair.

It is truly good to have wonderful orchestras in our state. The Jacksonville Symphony is certainly one of the best of them.