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ENTERTAINMENT & LEISURE

CLASSICS

Eights rule in A2SO's opener

Anniversaries, symphonies' numbers weigh in

BY SUSAN ISAACS NISBETT
News Special Writer

If Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra Music Director Arie Lipsky was a betting man, he would be putting his money on lucky number eight.

The opening concert of the orchestra's 80th season, which takes place Saturday evening at the Michigan Theater — which also celebrates 80 years this year — has crazy eights every which way you look, Lipsky pointed out in a recent phone call.

Hall and orchestra anniversaries aside, the concert begins Lipsky's eighth year at the head of the orchestra, and it features Dvorak's Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op 88.

Lest concert-goers decide the orchestra is programming by the numbers, the evening, entitled "Roots," also features two works with nary an eight in sight: Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major, with soloist Louis Nagel of the University of Michigan faculty; and Paul Fetler's "Three Poems by Walt Whitman," a 1976 American Bicentennial commission for the Minnesota Orchestra that Lipsky discovered when the Buffalo Philharmonic played the work during his tenure there.

The A2SO previously performed the Fetler piece in 2006, but there's method to the orchestra's madness in scheduling it again so soon: Along with the Fetler pieces it performed last season, "Three Poems by Walt Whitman" figures on the CD of Fetler's works that the orchestra is recording for Naxos. The Saturday concert, which Fetler will attend, wraps up the recording project.

"I expect the CD will come out in the spring," said Lipsky.

Once again, lawyer Thomas Blaske — husband of the orchestra's executive director, Mary Steffek Blaske, and a Whitman scholar as well as a poet himself (he publishes under a pseudonym in magazines like *The New Yorker*) — narrates, reading the two poems Fetler chose from Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and the poem entitled "Drum Taps," an affecting memoir of the poet's volunteer work caring for wounded Civil War soldiers.

The first movement conveys a nocturnal ambiance that builds to a climax and resolves quietly. The second

PREVIEW

The Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra

Who: Local professional ensemble.

What: Opening concert of the orchestra's 80th season, with works by Dvorak, Paul Fetler and Ravel.

When: Saturday, 8 p.m. Pre-concert lecture at 7 p.m. for ticket holders, with Fetler and Arie Lipsky.

Where: The Michigan Theater, 603 E. Liberty St.

How much: Tickets, \$10-\$47, by calling the A2SO, 734-94-4801, and online at www.a2so.com. Also at the Michigan Theater box office starting at 6 p.m. on concert day. Many discounts available.

A2SO FROM C1

Ravel concerto has daunting challenges

movement shouts the apocalypse of war in aggressive rhythms and sharp dynamics. The third and final movement is a gentle hymn calling for childlike innocence to return.

One of the challenges of recording a piece for full orchestra and narrator, Lipsky noted, is the balance.

"We have to make sure we can capture a very clear sound, not under and not over the orchestra, but with the orchestra," he said. "Luckily, that's the engineer's respon-

sibility and not mine."

Challenges abound in the Ravel concerto. Soloist Nagel, a pianist of immense technical command, calls it "Liszt with blue notes."

He adores the concerto, he said in a recent phone call, but that doesn't keep him from qualifying it as "rhythmically one of the trickiest things I've ever done. And the second movement is the hardest thing I've ever had to memorize." Added Lipsky: "That's what happens when

you combine a Spanish fiesta with American jazz. It's difficult to play, but easy to listen to."

Easy to listen to describes the Dvorak symphony as well. Less frequently played than the "New World," No. 9, it is still immensely popular, brimming with cheer and Bohemian melody.

"I like it more than No. 9," said Lipsky. "It's wonderfully orchestrated and very colorful. I think it will be a nice way to open our stage season."