

A2SO's 'Roots' soars under Lipsky's baton

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Being anchored to the terra firma of home, even if you leave, is a powerful thing. Saturday evening at the Michigan Theater, the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra celebrated the beginning of 80 years anchored to this leafy city with a concert entitled "Roots."

The program, under the baton of Conductor Arie Lipsky, showcased an orchestra grown incredibly strong with the years (and under Lipsky's direction) and composers - from Dvorak and Ravel to Paul Fetler, now 88 and in attendance - drawing sustenance from native (and favored) soil.

Fetler's "Three Poems by Walt Whitman," which the A2SO was recording Saturday for its Spring '09 Naxos CD of Fetler's work, is a case in point. Written as an American Bicentennial commission for the Minnesota Orchestra, "Three Poems" celebrates a quintessential American poet in a three-movement tone poem for orchestra and narrator.

I'm sure the bulk of Bicentennial commissions have enjoyed a happy burial since 1976, how wonderful that Fetler's piece is not among them. Expertly orchestrated, it is a rapturous, potent and atmospheric evocation of Whitman's words - from "Leaves of Grass" and the poem "Drum Taps" - spoken Saturday by Thomas Blaske.

If Blaske seemed occasionally too close to the microphone (too-plosive "p's" and "b's" will surely have to be fixed for the CD), all else was right with this world. Both Blaske and the orchestra, reprising a 2006 performance of the work, captured its essence: the rhythms and sounds of the natural world, the clangor of war, the chorale-like intoning of music's solace. Concertmaster Aaron Berofsky was a knockout in the work's violin solos.

Ravel's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G Major, which followed, with pianist Louis Nagel, a longtime member of the University of Michigan music faculty, pays its tributes to America, too, but in an oh-so-French way. Written after an American tour in which Ravel had met George Gershwin (and during which Ravel had hoped to play an early version of the piece), the work is permeated with jazz. There's also a mini-hoedown. But the pungencies of the harmonies, the sparkle of the keyboard writing and the simple soulfulness of the central movement's melody - an extended song for piano - are as unmistakably French as they are unmistakably Ravel. Pianist Nagel realized these elements with élan and finesse, with a sound perfectly calibrated to the music's effervescence.

The orchestra was fully on board, and stayed there for the evening's concluding work, Dvorak's lovely and very Bohemian Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88. Precision, clear textures, long lines, lots of color, a sense of the dance: this performance under Lipsky's baton had it all. What a way to begin a season.