

Symphonia's excellence

The success of the Williamsburg Symphonia's first program of 2013 bodes well for the remainder of the season. It was diverse and diverting, offering quite a bit of something for everyone.

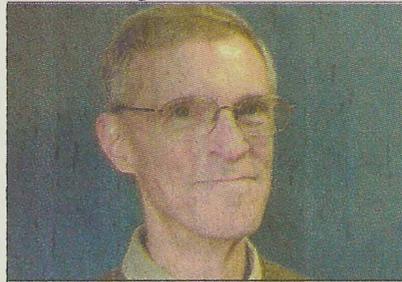
The evening opened on a cheerful note with the "Masquerade Suite" of Aram Khachaturian. The "Suite" is an excerpt taken from the full score written for Mikhail Lermontov's play, "Masquerade."

While the Othello-themed play is dark and built on such themes as suspected adultery, revenge, murder and madness, the incidental music to the play is ironically sunny if not whimsical. From its opening lilting "Waltz" through the flowing "Romance" to the frolicking and closing "Galop," the Symphonia's performance, guided by Janna Hymes, was clean, articulate, and engaging.

The major orchestral work on the program was Symphony No. 8 of Dvorak, which closed the evening. This work is somewhat a musically bipolar piece, a developed blend of darkness and light, playfulness and melancholia, reticence and heroism.

Despite its ups and downs, there is a sense of optimism that does prevail, most especially in the finale which is filled with heightened energy and enjoyment. In my past life as a French hornist, I had more than a few opportunities to play this piece and thus know it intimately. Without question, Hymes and the Symphonia cashed in on the work's myriad emotions and delivered it with écart, clarity, and

Soundings



John Shulson

The Williamsburg Symphonia, under Janna Hymes, with guest mandolin soloist Jeff Midkiff, in the Kimball Theatre, Jan. 14.

drive.

In between the jolly "Masquerade" and Dvorak came the evening's featured soloist, Jeff Midkiff, who was also the composer of the featured piece, "From the 'Blue Ridge,'" a concerto for mandolin. The title of the work quickly dispelled any thoughts of hearing the mandolin in music reflective of its 18th century Italian roots. Quite the opposite.

The piece directly reflects Midkiff's roots in the Blue Ridge Mountains and his fondness for the bluegrass music tradition, with a touch of swing and jazz in the mix. Although he's a trained clarinetist with a degree in music education and performance and is the orchestra director for the Roanoke City Schools, Midkiff's involvement in bluegrass music is evident in the work's overall structure.

Not that this suggests "Blue Ridge" is all fast mandolin pickin' because it isn't. In fact, it's a work that cleverly blends a so-

phisticated orchestral foundation with mandolin playing suitable for classically-oriented lines as well as those more down-home.

It opens with swirling sounds from the orchestra and mandolin that appropriately does suggest the beauty of the Blue Ridge area and its peaceful life. It's a fascinating combination of bluegrass-inspired emotions with those of a somewhat big city orchestral sound that works well on many levels.

The second movement is thoughtful and reflective and brought to mind the emotions so superbly expressed by Copland and his Americana music. According to program notes, Midkiff's stimulus for this movement came from "Wildwood Flower" and the Carter Family and Bill Monroe's "Roanoke."

The finale, "Crooked Road" refers to the extensive trail of bluegrass and country music that winds through Appalachia and southwestern Virginia and embraces such luminaries as Ernie Ford, the Stoneman Family, and Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, the latter which were featured in the Virginia Arts Festival back in 2007. The movement is full of foot-stomping, toe-tapping rhythms and was just great fun to hear.

As for Medkiff, his virtuoso fast-paced mandolin playing was impressive, as was his ability to weave the most delicate of lines, all of which added to the delightful diversity of the Symphonia's fare in this Masterworks Concert.