

QCSO shines in stellar all-American program

By Jonathan Turner, jturner@qconline.com | Posted: Sunday, March 8, 2015 9:39 pm

DAVENPORT -- The "Star-Spangled Banner" -- traditionally sung at the start of each Quad City Symphony Orchestra Masterworks concert -- was especially stirring and meaningful this past weekend.

Music director and conductor Mark Russell Smith led the QCSO in a deeply satisfying all-American program, kicked off Saturday night at the Adler Theatre with committed, passionate and technically dazzling performances by the orchestra and guest soloist, pianist Joel Fan.

Including a wonderful world-premiere piece by St. Ambrose composer William Campbell, four of the five works were given their first performances by the QCSO. All told, it was a thoughtful, delightful pairing of the familiar and popular (George Gershwin and Aaron Copland) and the less familiar, but equally deserving of admiration (Roy Harris and Morton Gould).

Mr. Campbell's too-short (at just five minutes) "Where the River Bends" sensitively evoked both our region and the American landscape as a whole. From a gentle, calm opening -- with warm, comforting strings and meandering, flowing flute and clarinet -- the "River" gained energy and momentum, and the fuller orchestra unleashed assured, confident and powerful playing, like the dynamic, forceful nation the musical portrait represents.

One could find similar reflections (the country and its potent, challenging music) throughout the awe-inspiring program.

Mr. Smith -- an ardent, articulate champion of contemporary music -- related from the podium how special the Roy Harris Symphony No. 3 is in the history of American music. The Oklahoma native was largely self-taught as a musician until college, and the 1939 single-movement work was a huge hit through the 1950s, Mr. Smith noted.

It signified what it meant to be American at the time, echoing angst over the start of World War II, eschewing European influences and combining a deeply felt "brain and brawn" in its character, the conductor said. The performance was certainly moving, though the first chunk was free of much discernible melody -- more atmospheric and feeling aimless, wandering in the aural wilderness.

It got more engaging as the piece became more rhythmic and outgoing, with big brass, and a march-like dirge in the timpani. At times mournful and tragic, Mr. Smith clearly steered the Harris to its overpowering, climactic finish.

The concert centerpiece, the beloved Gershwin "Rhapsody in Blue," was virtually the opposite -- an unending abundance of infectious melody; surging, impatient energy; relentless rhythmic drive; and

soaring romanticism.

Mr. Fan, with seeming effortless, put on a ravishing, virtuosic display -- his solo passages often very (and nearly too) fast but not slipshod. He was obviously in control, but that impatience in the music in his hands made it seem as if he could not wait to get through certain parts. The 1924 work -- performed just three months after its New York premiere by the composer and Paul Whiteman Orchestra in Davenport's Col Ballroom -- retained all of its brash, refreshing optimism.

First performed by the QCSO in 1943, the "Rhapsody" revealed solo virtuosos in the orchestra as well, including the famous clarinet glissando and wail at the opening and a playful muted trumpet. Mr. Fan showcased similarly delicate, exacting and sparkling moves across the keys -- as if he were tossing off glittery, shimmering fairy dust.

The beautiful, lyrical love theme with the full orchestra always gets me, and the QCSO pulled out all the stops. You let it wash over you and drown in its heavenly dreaminess and luxuriate in the triumphant majesty of the work's conclusion. Mr. Fan and orchestra received an immediate, well-deserved standing ovation.

He returned after intermission with another jazzy concert work, the Gould "Interplay," which in 1945 became the score to a Jerome Robbins ballet, also here a QCSO premiere. There was more buoyant exuberance here, as Mr. Fan led the orchestra in the varied, four-movement piece -- alternately loping and carefree, and aggressive and sprightly. I particularly liked the third bluesy movement, with its brushes on drums, plucked basses, and cool piano that gave you the feeling of an intimate jazz club.

In this QCSO's 100th season, there was a certain symmetry with the Gould, since that composer conducted the orchestra in 1965, in a world premiere of a work commissioned for its then-50th season.

The rousing Copland four dances from "Rodeo" rounded out the program with panache and vigor. Somewhat shockingly, this was the first Q-C performance of all four episodes penned for the famous 1942 Agnes DeMille ballet (selections were first done here in 1962).

It also made great sense for Mr. Smith to program two ballets back to back, and again the athletic, protean strength of the music reflects the dominance, the wide openness and boundless future that America often displays. A cowboy ballet, Copland's "Rodeo" is a lot of fun to listen to -- combining a poignancy and nostalgia for the Old West with gorgeous, simple, noble melodies, with the iconic "Hoe-Down" at the end, jaunty, happy, full of grandeur and celebration.