

GBS concert features works by Gershwin, Copland

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Article Last Updated: 11/16/2008 11:55:27 PM EST

The Greater Bridgeport Symphony's "Spirit of America" concert on Saturday night at The Klein turned out to be mostly a Yankee Doodle Dandy with George Gershwin and Aaron Copland compositions as centerpieces and guest pianist Joel Fan at the Steinway.

Maestro Gustav Meier was his usual superlative self, directing the GBS orchestra's tour of Copland's "Appalachian Spring" and Gershwin's "Piano Concerto in F major," a rather nondescript title for a musical filled with bright colors and boundless energy.

Right from the concerto's opening tympani blasts, Meier put the GBS in the thick of New York City's action in 1925. That year at Carnegie Hall, with the 27-year-old Gershwin at the piano, his concerto premiered with the New York Symphony. He was already one of Broadway's best-ever composers, and here he was melding jazz into classical form.

No wonder returning pianist Fan is a huge crowd favorite. He wowed the audience with the way he captured Gershwin's vitality and jazzy lyricism, as if he were the composer's right -- and left -- hands.

Fan gave new meaning to Gershwin's signature formula of repetition and great melodies. When was the last time you could hum portions of a concerto after the show as you do with Gershwin's popular music?

Fan made instant fans from the languid opening, to the bluesy emotion of the second movement to the mad dashes up and down the keyboard as if his fingers were doing a triple-time Charleston.

After the blues breather, Fan and the GBS took us to the electrifying finale with the speed of racing subways and cabs at rush hour in Manhattan and more wattage than Con Ed uses to light Times Square.

Like Gershwin, Copland was also Brooklyn-born. Yet he brought a sweeping vision of Americana to his music, such as in his 1944 masterpiece ballet, "Appalachian Spring." What a treat it was to hear Meier tell us how he owed a great deal to Copland, who he knew, who opened doors for Meier when he came to America, and who was a kind man to all.

The GBS captured all the beautiful emotion Copland painted into this story of a bride and groom -- their wedding, daily activity, plans and new home. Meier and company gave meaning to Copland's own formula "to say what [he] had to say in the simplest possible terms." Simple, yet exuberant, to tender. In the section with the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" as a cue, the GBS extended that idea wondrously, quoting the hymn from brasses to majestic strings.

Copland wanted to communicate to a widespread audience; the GBS helped him further his boundaries.

For extra measure, the evening included two movements of a symphony by Connecticut composer Robert Carl from the Hartt School in Hartford: the tone poems "Memories of Forgotten Ancestors" in its world premiere and "The World Turned Upside Down."

The composer was on hand to introduce them, describing the first as a "strange piece" and both as "fevered dreams." The first was a nightmare of clashing, cacophonous sound. Both turned classic composition on its ear.

Thankfully, Gershwin followed, and the Spirit of America prevailed.