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ORCHESTRAL MUSIC REVIEW

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Significant World Premiere Highlights Eclectic EMF Concert

By [William Thomas Walker](#)

July 16, 2016 - Greensboro, NC:

It says a great deal about the growing reputation of the [Eastern Music Festival](#), now in its 55th season, that it was chosen for a significant world premiere. The Viola Concerto (2016) by [Julia Adolphe](#) (b. 1988) received its full orchestral performance in Dana Auditorium on the [Guilford College](#) campus in preparation for its New York City premiere. Music director [Gerard Schwarz](#) filled out the rest of the program with imaginative and eclectic works reflective of nationalism along with colorfully skillful orchestration. The superb faculty that comprised the Eastern Festival Orchestra was supplemented with some of the talented students for the demanding extra brass in the concluding work of the evening concert.

Exotic instrumental colors and Spanish-flavored rhythms were features of the opening work – "Alborada del gracioso" (1918) by Maurice Ravel ((1875-1937). It is the composer's own orchestration of the fourth movement from his *Miroirs* (1905), a set of five movements for piano which are intended to suggest, as in reflections seen through a mirror, rather than actual depictions. An *alborado* is a Spanish song sung in the morning, while a *gracioso* is less a clown, as characterized by Pulcinella from Italian *commedia dell'arte*, rather than a humorous fixer, like Figaro in Rossini's opera *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Ravel transfers the challenging keyboard part into dazzling instrumental affects with harp and crisp pizzicato strings evoking the sound of a Spanish guitar while the *gracioso* is embodied by the solo bassoon.

Schwarz and his musicians brought out the full kaleidoscope of tone colors and vivid rhythms demanded by Ravel. Orchestra balance was excellent and players cleanly articulated every twist and turn and sudden changes of tempo in the score.

Second on the program came the premiere performance of Adolphe's Viola Concerto as played by New York Philharmonic principal violist [Cynthia Phelps](#). Phelps' residency as a Distinguished Teaching Artist at this year's EMF is sponsored by the Tannenbaum-Sternberger Foundation. Composer Adolphe (who was in attendance at this well-received first reading) is racking up an impressive array of important awards and commissions including the 2016 Lincoln Center Emerging Artist Award and this major viola concerto.

The Viola Concerto was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, the League of American Orchestras, and violist Phelps – its intended soloist. Adolphe's 20-minute long concerto is entitled *Unearth, Release* and is in three movements: "Captive Voices," "Surface Tension," and "Embracing Mist." In the first movement, the viola is often juxtaposed with the full orchestra. Adolphe describes this as "asserting the soloist's identity and musical voice" on the part of the composer, soloist, and solo instrument. The second movement is a scherzo-like extension of the competition between soloist and orchestra. In the final movement, the orchestra becomes "an embracing mist," a thinned out texture "through which the viola moves."

Adolphe gave Phelps a broad palette of both tone color and dynamic shading within the writing of this piece. The rich lower and middle registers of the viola had plenty of scope but the extremes of the instrument's range were explored with some fine high harmonics. The composer has treated the orchestra brilliantly by only giving it its *ff* head while the viola rests. The textures were either thinned out or the dynamics were hushed and ethereal during Phelps' solos. The opening

EVENT INFORMATION

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\$35 -- Dana Auditorium , (336) 274-0067 ,

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movement was slow with the plaintive viola often surrounded by hushed strings or paired with individual players such as concertmaster [Jeffrey Multer](#) or a spare *pp* orchestral piano or punctuated by light percussion.

These imaginative pairings continued in the lively second movement, which linked the viola with various brass and woodwinds including a lovely duet with a bass clarinet played by [Kelly Burke](#). Highlights of the last movement were Phelps' gorgeous playing of some high harmonics as well as duets with a muted trumpet and, I believe, an English horn.

Adolphe's Viola Concerto is a substantial contribution to the repertoire with interesting writing for the soloist and a model of how to orchestrate for string instruments that can be easily lost in a full orchestra. It should win advocates from violists, and I hope it gets recorded by Phelps as soloist. It ought to inspire cellists to seek out Adolphe for commissions for their instrument's slim repertoire of concertos. The concerto will receive its New York premiere on November 17-18, 2016 with Phelps as soloist with the New York Philharmonic under their new music director Jaap Van Zweden.

Another model of how to score a concerto for subtle instruments came after intermission. *Fantasia para un Gentilhombre* (1954) for Guitar and Orchestra by the blind Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-99) makes use of a greatly reduced orchestra and delicate dynamics when the soloist is featured. The work is dedicated to Andrés Segovia and sets four Spanish dances from the books by 17th century Spanish guitarist Gaspar Sanz. The first movement pairs a light-hearted *villano* with a *ricercare*, a Renaissance precursor to the Baroque fugue. The second movement, "Españoleta e fanfare de la caballeria de Nápoles" is much like an Italian Siciliana. Bouncing bow wood on the strings is meant to evoke horses' hooves from the era when Spain ruled the area of Naples before Italian reunification. The third movement is based on a hatchet dance. The finale is a vigorous dance from the Canary Islands.

I enjoy guitar concertos on recordings, but this performance of the Rodrigo is the only live guitar concerto performance in the region in which I have been enthusiastically delighted. All the others have suffered from amplification and often "none too subtle." Dana Auditorium is one of the finest acoustical facilities in the state. Conductor Schwarz controlled his reduced forces' dynamics superbly providing ideal accompaniment that never covered his brilliant guitarist [Jason Vieaux](#). Vieaux brought a gorgeous, warm tone from his guitar. His solos and cadenza-like passages were marvelous. How wonderful it was to hear the pure natural sound of the guitar!

This concert came to a dazzling conclusion amid the brassy fanfares of one of my favorite works, the *Sinfonietta* (1926) of Leoš Janáček (1854-1928). It was commissioned in 1925 by the Sokol Gymnastic Festival in Prague to celebrate the post WW I freeing of Czechoslovakia from the losing Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. Its five movements depict scenes in the Moravian composer's hometown of Brno. Janáček was inspired by the sound of a military band concert in a park. The score calls for an extraordinary amount of extra brass making it an ideal work for music festivals. The brass are 4 horns in F, 9 trumpets in C, 3 trumpets in F, 2 brass trumpets, 4 trombones, 2 tenor tubas (Euphoniums), and tuba. The 9 trumpets, 2 brass trumpets, and 2 tenor tubas are only heard in the 1st and 5th movements. The composer's highly individual and mature style is characterized by melodies based on speech patterns, frequent use of irregular ostinato patterns, and structural use of contrasting harmonies. The latter are made up of whole-tone and octatonic scales as well as layering of melodic elements. The brilliant opening "Fanfare" is followed by "The Castle," which features swirling woodwinds and ends with a trumpet fanfare. The third movement, "The Queen's Monastery," begins somberly but ends in a weird dance punctuated by brass fanfares. Different instruments enter in turn in the fourth movement, "The Street," depicting people gathering to attend a meeting in "The Town Hall" of the fifth movement which unleashes all 12 trumpets in the wild celebration of independence.

Schwarz and his much-expanded orchestra of faculty, as well as enthusiastic and skilled students, met every demand of Janáček in spades. The phrasing was wonderfully idiomatic with all the forces perfectly balanced and responsive to ever-sudden shift and turn of this magnificent score. Bravo for a memorable evening!

To read more about the premiere of the Adolphe commission read the *Greensboro News and Record* article [here](#).

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