

## **ASO's Dogs of Desire @ EMPAC 5/21/10**

By JOSEPH DALTON  
Special to the Times Union

TROY – The Albany Symphony Orchestra's funky chamber sub-group the Dogs of Desire has got a perfect theme song in Arthur Bloom's merging of K.C. and the Sunshine Band's "That's the Way I Like It" with strains of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto. It's a lighthearted blend of styles and eras, electronic and acoustics textures.

Those same elements showed up throughout Friday night's concert in the EMPAC theatre. It was the Dog's most coherent and consistently strong line-up of new works in some years.

David Alan Miller's theme this year was technology and invention. After a brief minimalist riff by Mark Mellits opened the program, two pioneers of electronics were honored in back to back works. Patrick Burke's "Everything Else" was a light and colorful tribute to Nikola Tesla that evoked tuneful and syncopated music of the early 20th century. An accompanying video by Kamen Bonev mixed electronic waves with old photos and newspaper clippings.

David Mallamud used more explicit references to silent films, vaudeville, and keystone cops in a half-hour unstaged opera about Thomas Edison. It opened with Strauss' "Also Sprach Zarathustra," just one of a profusion of quotes. The half dozen or so scenes each began with a tongue in cheek, self-referential recitative. Mallamud still tends to work his ideas until they're threadbare. But putting a song from the rock band AC/DC near the end of an opera in which alternating and direct current are characters was unexpected and brilliant.

There was no kitch, just plenty of fresh and inventive music in Todd Reynold's "Centrifuge." Along with the composer on amplified violin, the piece also included three musical robots, inventions of Eric Singer. One was a kind of twanging guitar and the others offered mechanized percussion. The ASO's 13 players weren't lost in the engaging mix.

Frank O'Hara's "Is It Dirty" inspired a fine work by Ted Hearne. Surprisingly, the poem is really more about urban grime than low morals. Hearne evoked both with a wobbling electric bass, and some scratchy strokes on the strings. Working in brief forms, too many Dogs composers over pack their pieces but Hearne's orchestration allowed some welcome breathing room.

With "Ave Maria" arpeggios, Kenneth Eberhard's "Karaoke Time" felt like a benediction to end the night, though two familiar encores followed. Alexandra Sweeton and Kamala Sankaram were the charming and hard working vocalists.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union. He blogs at [www.HudsonSounds.org](http://www.HudsonSounds.org)

### **MUSIC REVIEW**

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: EMPAC, RPI campus, Troy

Duration: Two hours, 15 minutes

The crowd: almost 400 (nearly a full house), all ages

## **Albany Symphony Orchestra @ EMPAC, 5/22/10**

By JOSEPH DALTON  
Special to the Times Union

TROY – There was plenty of color and drama in all four works on the Albany Symphony Orchestra's annual American Music Festival program Saturday night at EMPAC. The highlight, though, was from a Finnish composer.

Eighty-two year old Einojuhani Rautavaara completed his percussion concerto, "Incantations," just last year for soloist Colin Currie. For being a piece centered on a huge battery of instruments that are whacked and banged, it was a very soulful effort. A rapturous tune concluded the outer movements in the manner of Sibelius.

A moment of pure transcendence came near the end of the final cadenza. Against a long sustained note in the basses, Currie was busy with complex patterns on the marimba and drums. Suddenly he was on the vibraphone and the ascension to its ringing metallic sound was magical and transporting.

Currie was also just fun to watch, a mix of athletic agility and studious focus.

Composer Stacy Garrop returned for the final performance of her season-long residency. Conductor David Alan Miller was so taken by her take on Medusa, heard in the fall, that he suggested it be expanded.

Garrop's Mythology Symphony is now three-quarters finished and two new sections, on the Sirens and the Fates, received their premiere. She's got a flair for vivid orchestration and a taste for grand epic. But the shape of all these pieces is much the same – one long heavy pounding crescendo. Aren't there some myths that aren't tragic?

Miller had another good idea in suggesting the Hudson River School of painters as inspiration for a new work by James Primosch. Coming after the Garrop and Rautavaara, his "Luminism" felt audaciously understated and detailed. Shimmering strings and long gently rocking lines for the horns characterized much of the writing.

John Harbison's "The Great Gatsby" Suite concluded the program and is being recorded for CD release. It featured an ensemble in the center rear of the orchestra, with saxophone, banjo and violin, that beautifully evoked early jazz and whole the flapper era. All those catchy tunes were actually Harbison's own.

In each of the two movements, the full and churning orchestra eventually wins out over the nimble ensemble just as crime and deceit subsumes the gay parties in Fitzgerald's novel.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union. He blogs at [www.hudsonsounds.org](http://www.hudsonsounds.org).

### **MUSIC REVIEW**

Albany Symphony Orchestra

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: EMPAC, RPI Campus, Troy

Duration: Two hours 15 minutes with one intermission.

The crowd: Perhaps 1,000 people, most of the ASO regulars plus more young adults than usual.

## **Review: ASO in top form for two new works**

Sunday, May 23, 2010

By Geraldine Freedman

TROY — Two world premieres and the remarkably agile artistry of percussionist Colin Currie were some of the treats a very large crowd enjoyed Saturday night at the Experimental Media & Performing Arts Center as part of the Albany Symphony Orchestra's American Music Festival.

The orchestra was in great form and music director David Alan Miller was in his element as they navigated often foreign and virtuosic terrain. The concert opened with the world premiere of the second and third installment of Stacy Garrop's "Mythology Symphony." Audiences in November heard the first movement.

Garrop writes with a great sense of color and drama that is both visual and visceral. For "The Lovely Sirens" (part II), the mood was urgent and dark with strong rhythms, blaring brass, and much percussion. Garrop used an expansive range of sound and color to create monsters of the deep — those sailors didn't have a chance.

For "The Fates of Man" (part III), the three mythological sisters who spin, measure and cut the fiber of man, the music was dark and foreboding as it built to high volumes with many counter themes in complex harmonies. The road was tortuous and filled with angst and terror. Big thrilling chords were like bursts of fire only to ebb into a mournful demise.

James Primosch said his "Luminism" was a meditation on light. Much of the piece, which was a world premiere, wove in and out of various shades, some spare and peaceful, others threatening and violent. Because of this flux, there was no time line, which gave it a lack of direction.

Einojuhani Rautavaara's Percussion Concerto (2009) suffered a bit of that same meditative wandering in its first two movements during which Currie sounded out delicate but technically challenging non-stop passages. But he earned his keep in the final movement, especially in the cadenza, which he wrote.

Currie sizzled. He skipped among the almost 10 different percussion instruments with precision, never missing a beat. His two and four-mallet work was brilliant, his sense of pacing and focused intensity was impressive. Miller and the orchestra provided a perfect support.

John Harbison's Suite from his 1999 opera, "The Great Gatsby" was expert, clever and had all the swing and sway of the flapper age. His connections between 1920s-type tunes and more serious material had a special smoothness.

## **Colin Currie and Empire State Youth Percussion Ensemble @ EMPAC, 5/23/10**

By JOSEPH DALTON, special to the Times Union

TROY – You'd think the performing artists might have gotten the day off after their efforts the prior evening. But the ambition of the Albany Symphony Orchestra and its weekend-long American Music Festival at EMPAC meant that one more event was still in store for Sunday afternoon.

The short percussion concert featured rising star Colin Currie, who had already wowed a large crowd the prior night with his performance of the Ratavaara concerto. Sharing the afternoon bill was the eleven-member Empire State Youth Percussion Ensemble, which had its own high profile event Saturday night – a concert at Carnegie Hall.

Everyone seemed fresh and energetic, though. The only surprise and disappointment was that the soloist and the ensemble didn't perform together. It actually seemed that they'd never actually laid eyes on each other until the event.

Currie performed four works, opening with "Ghanaia" a clever effort by Matthias Schmitt. It was full of overlapping geometric melodies and expanding and contracting rhythmic patterns. For his remaining selections, Currie used pre-recorded accompaniment.

Steve Reich was true to his minimalist style in his 1994 duet "Nagoya Marimbas." One part came through the speakers, the other in person. Their cascading lines echoed each other a beat or two apart.

Two works by David Maric felt rather inconsequential. In "Sense and Innocence" Currie played random figures amidst a floating electronic ambience. "Trilogy," which ended the afternoon, was as flashy as it was gimmicky. It's surprising how ho-hum a bunch of cymbals, bongos and snare drums can get.

Before Currie's finale, the ensemble offered two selections. A portion of David Friedman's "Twenty Minutes Off the Pavement" was elegant and easy jazz, with bits of improvisation from vibraphone soloist Colleen Bernstein. Mark Foster conducted.

Percussionist Richard Albagli is a longtime ASO member and illustrious teacher. Let's hope he also finds time to compose regularly because his "Metamorphosis," which he conducted, was the most imaginative and evocative work of the afternoon.

It didn't feel like just another percussion piece but a vivid orchestral statement in three movements. It started with a whispered beat from the bass drum and gentle footsteps from the tympani. Later, a set of chimes could be heard from offstage. The "Fire Dance" movement brought to mind the "March to the Gallows" from Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union. He blogs at: [www.HudsonSounds.org](http://www.HudsonSounds.org)

**MUSIC REVIEW:** Colin Currie and Empire State Youth Percussion Ensemble

When: 4 p.m. Sunday

Where: EMPAC, RPI Campus, Troy

Duration: 75 minutes with no intermission

The crowd: Maybe 100, lots of parents and some stray new music fans.