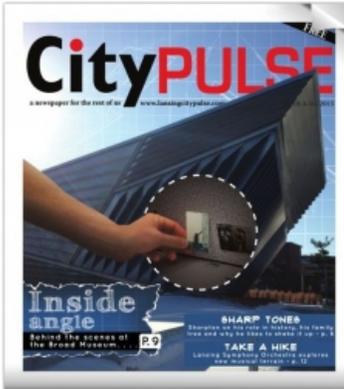


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Wednesday, March 4, 2015

Mysterious mountain

LANSING SYMPHONY HIKES INTO UNCHARTED TERRAIN WITH NEW MUSIC BY LOCAL COMPOSER

by Lawrence Cosentino



A vision of a man walking up a mountain, and a collaboration that got gloriously out of hand, promise to push Saturday's Lansing Symphony concert into exciting new territory.

Well-known music by Elgar and Mozart

is on the docket, but the night's most striking feature is a large-scaled, luminous new work with deep local roots: "Seven Ascents for Flute and Orchestra," by MSU-based composer Marjan Helms with LSO principal flutist Richard Sherman as soloist.

"Seven Ascents" is no perfunctory nod to local talent. It's a meditative braid of lyrical melodies clocking in at some 45 minutes.

Both Helms and Sherman said that working together on the music has changed their lives.

By the end last year's premiere of "Seven Ascents" with the Jackson Symphony Orchestra, Sherman was trembling.

"I was so choked up in the third movement that I could barely play," Sherman said.

They seem awed and surprised by the major work that came out of their close collaboration.

"I feel like I'm the herald of something," Sherman said. "Melodies that have never been heard before — I get to share them with people."

Muffitt was so impressed by the piece that he went out on a limb and programmed it, even though it's the longest work the symphony will play all year.

"This is a very beautiful and expansive work with a great sense of spirituality," Muffitt said. "You sense there is a deep program behind it."

The maestro isn't kidding. The genesis of the music involved more than a few real-life ascents.

Helms is a founding faculty member of MSU's Community Music School, where she is composer-in-residence and head of the piano program.

At an MSU Symphony concert 10 years ago, she was amazed by Sherman's passionate performance of Christopher Rouse's flute concerto. She emailed Sherman that night.

"I thanked him for reminding me why I went into music in the first place," she said.

Large-scaled works for flute and orchestra are few.

"A few years ago I would have thought it was crazy to write something like this," Helms said.

But Helms was deeply impressed by Sherman's intensity and musicianship. More important, they shared an unabashed love of spirituality in music.

"There's a real spiritual dimension in ('Seven Ascents') that's unusual for flute," Sherman said. "A lot of the stuff that's for flute is too virtuosic, too many notes."

The Jackson Symphony agreed to commission the piece from Helms, with Sherman as soloist. Helms spent about a year thinking about the "spiritual world" she wanted to explore. At first, she envisioned music inspired by verses from several different mystical traditions.

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