

Review of the March 2, 2013 Concord Band Winter Concert

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Last night, I had the pleasure of attending a wonderful concert at The Performing Arts Center at 51 Walden in Concord. The Concord Band performed “Rhapsody in Blue: Made in America,” their annual Winter Concert under the direction of James O’Dell. The featured piano soloist was Michael Lewin, a talented, enthusiastic professor of piano at Boston Conservatory.

To a nearly sold-out crowd, O’Dell stepped on stage, and the music began immediately. To me, this is the correct way to begin a concert. Many community groups will begin with announcements about future programs, or housekeeping issues, or with biographical information about the composer whose music the audience is looking forward to hearing. The Concord Band skipped all of this and brought us directly to the reason we had come: to hear the blended, contrasting, unique and diverse sounds.

The intonation and tone quality proved excellent from the start. *Americans We* is one of Henry Fillmore’s more famous marches, featuring a trumpet trio that sparkled with crisp tonguing and excellent balance. When the woodwinds added their filigree in the subsequent repetitions of the main theme, they did so with sparkle and panache. The conductor remained understated and clear, and the respect his musicians have for him is quite apparent.

Next on the program was Robert Russell Bennett’s *Suite of Old American Dances*. Rhythmically complex, the Cakewalk uses syncopated rhythm, and a melody which jumps all around in fourths and thirds of all kinds. The conclusion of this movement is so compelling that the audience could not resist applause, even though it was only the first of five movements. Continuing with Bennett’s Broadway sound, the rest of the *Dances* showed great dynamic range and sensitivity. One memorable moment was a low-register flute section soli, when the delicate percussion instruments gently added to the texture. Later, trombones and euphoniums played in beautifully-blended unison, the oboe played a lovely theme, and an ethereal combination of sounds created by the English horn and flutes was difficult, at first, to identify.

Using the microphone to give the audience valuable information, James O’Dell told the audience that this is a “player’s piece.” The musicians love to play it, the music presents challenges that stretch the technical abilities of the group. The audience loves it just as much.

My personal favorite was Percy Grainger’s *Children’s March*. Beginning with the low melody in the bassoon, piano and bass clarinet, we hear the triumphant fanfare emerge out of nowhere. Based on the Scottish tune “Over the Hills and Far Away,” the melody is passed around from section to section. The French horn section had a particularly beautiful go at it, and the last chord of the piece made the audience chuckle.

Band President Ken Troup presented an award for the longest-tenured member of the Band, trombonist Andy Nichols. Andy has played with the Concord Band for a full fifty years, and is retiring this season. Nichols looked emotional when receiving a plaque, which Troup read to the audience.

The first half concluded with Charles Ives' famous set of *Variations on America*. Even to someone who is very familiar with the piece, each time I hear it provides a new and different experience. The original statement does not read like a theme, and expresses humor at the outset, in typical Ives fashion. The first expression of the melody is understated, *sostenuto* and not the slightest bit majestic, with creative chromatic sprinkles that grow increasingly dissonant. One wonders if Ives might be making a statement about his country itself, with variations that travel the world: one that sounds European, another Spanish, as well as canons in multiple keys. Could he have been describing the melting pot in musical terms? By the end, Ives sounds as if he has taken the top off a blender and allowed all of the themes to spray across the kitchen, only to come together with a homophonic, simpler ending.

After intermission, we were delighted to see the stage rearranged for the second half, with the piano in the front of the band. While soloist Michael Lewin had played the piano during the Grainger, he had not yet been the featured guest. When Lewin entered the stage this time, he shook hands with the concertmaster. The flashy *Célèbre Tarantelle* by Louis Moreau Gottschalk was fast and furious, and met with wild applause.

The least interesting piece on the program was the *Combination March* by Scott Joplin. It served as a good contrast to the rest of the exciting second half. The band began to show fatigue during a demanding program. I noticed that the brass section would benefit from the horn section being situated closer to the trumpets and trombones.

Finally, we were treated to the most famous of all, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Michael Lewin and the Concord Band definitely did not disappoint! Clarinetist Steven Barbas began the trill and ascending scale followed by a glissando, and the band took turns with the piano soloist to throw bits of melody back and forth. Lewin approached the technically demanding work with athletic perfection, and used extremes in dynamics and rubato. O'Dell and the band did an amazing job following the soloist, sometimes through very difficult fluidity in tempo. There was never a time when one wondered if the conductor would be able to find the correct spot to interject a bit of accompaniment.

One of the most memorable moments of the piece was the sublime TWA theme, which emerged with grace after an especially energetic and powerful piano solo. Lewin takes his work very seriously. He does not perform with the humor one might expect from the music he was playing. His musicianship is superb, with incredible dynamic contrast, and his playing showed soul and beautiful expression.

Rhapsody in Blue was met with a standing ovation. Before his final encore (another Gershwin piece), Michael Lewin gave a nod to the musical community in Concord. "I am so impressed with the facility you have here," he explained, naming each of the groups supported by the Friends of Performing Arts in Concord, "and if every community in Massachusetts had one of these, the Arts would be much healthier."

Congratulations to all involved, and I look forward to the next Concord Band concert!