

Christopher Taylor

With the North Carolina Symphony

"Guest pianist Christopher Taylor applied prodigious talent to Britten's Young Apollo"

Symphony connects the dots

BY ROY C. DICKS - Correspondent

RALEIGH The N.C. Symphony gave one of its most creative and informative concerts Friday night, a "Composer Portrait" of John Coolidge Adams.

Music director Grant Llewellyn was particularly keen to helm this concert, but had to remain in Wales during his wife's unexpected surgery. The search for a substitute familiar with Adams' complex, multilayered works ended happily with Benjamin Wallfisch, whose supreme confidence Friday belied his last-minute arrival. For audience members not fully aware of Adams' style, the program cleverly prefaced Adams' works with pieces by composers who influenced him. This had the added benefit of showing how Adams' so-called "minimalist" elements were present in earlier composers' works.

In his little-known "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage," Beethoven set Goethe poems depicting the eerie quiet of a windless ocean followed by suddenly boisterous gales. The N.C. Master Chorale, augmented with the East Carolina University Chamber Singers, produced ethereal mystery and joyful force for this short piece, echoed later on a grander scale in Adams' "Harmonium."

This thirty-five minute work sets poems by John Donne and Emily Dickinson, concentrating less on expressing individual lines as characterizing each poem's mood. The first movement depicts the nature of love as constantly restless; the second offers death as a slow-moving procession; the third paints erotic ecstasy as wildly exuberant. Adams demands close attention to all his slightly changing details in what otherwise might seem static or repetitive passages.

Wallfisch impressed with precise control of dynamics and pace, the orchestra reconfirmed its supremacy in contemporary fare, and the chorus demonstrated director Alfred E. Sturgis' rigorous attention to difficult rhythmic shifts.

Guest pianist Christopher Taylor applied prodigious talent to Britten's "Young Apollo," a fanfare-like work pitting the piano against a solo string quartet and the orchestra's strings. Taylor's intense playing of repeated runs and rising chords buoyed the piece along. In contrast, but with similar elements, Adams' "ErosPiano" had a relaxed, almost improvisatory feel, conjuring Debussy and Gershwin, with Taylor emphasizing the lush, moonlit mood.

The great innovator Charles Ives was represented by "The Unanswered Question," which layers droning strings, soulful solo trumpet and chattering flutes. Adams takes such layering to exhilarating extremes in "A Short Ride in a Fast Machine." Ablaze with seven percussionists, the orchestra filled the hall with the work's brilliant colors, rewarded by the evening's loudest applause music_theater@lycos.com

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