It was my first week at school. I’m sure anyone who’s been a student can remember what that feels like: the sense of excitement at a new beginning, the apprehension, the pleasant sense of confusion from trying to learn so many new faces and new names and new buildings, the relief that the long-awaited semester is finally here. For a few short weeks in September, the whole world seems new again. And I will admit to a personal bias before saying this, but I do think that students at the College of Fine Arts enjoy a particularly good vantage point from which to survey that new prospect.

As I soon found out, the connection was that each of those evocative pieces had been written especially for us, the Philharmonic, by members of the composition faculty. And the overarching theme was a celebration of the first 100 years of the School of Music. Each work could certainly stand on its own, but as a group they are known as the Centennial Suite. Denis Colwell, the head of the School of Music, approached Carnegie Mellon faculty composers Nancy Galbraith, Leonardo Balada, Marilyn Taft Thomas, and Reza Vali to write music to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the School of Music. Each work had been written especially by living composers, but then also to welcome to Carnegie Mellon: the opportunity not only to play new music but to have the honor of bringing this music to life. As we worked our way through the Suite in the first rehearsal, I realized that our greatest challenge might be not in learning the notes (although those were certainly difficult), but rather in capturing the mercurial shifts of mood from one movement to the next. Each part of the Suite presents to the listener an entirely different and self-contained sound world. So the real challenge was to perform a compelling characterization of each movement, while also finding a way to link them together seamlessly.

The Suite opens with Marilyn Taft Thomas’s Celebration for Orchestra, a light, jazz-infused piece reminiscent of Posture. Taft Thomas has said that this piece is “meant to be free of philosophical angst—just plain fun!” She scored the work for a lightweight, more transparent ensemble, with the goal of showcasing several student soloists at different points throughout the piece.

In contrast, Leonardo Balada’s Memories Nr. 1—Barcelona 1938 took us on a dark and painful journey back to the bloodiest battles of the Spanish Civil War. Balada was born in Barcelona in 1933, and the piece revisits his experience of the war as a young child. The movement is also a sound collage of the war-torn streets of Barcelona, in which the Spanish, Catalan, Irish, and American folk songs being sung by the volunteers in the Resistance blend with the Internationale, the anthem of the socialist workers’ movement.

The final movement of Centennial Suite was without a doubt also the most difficult, both in technical and emotional terms. Reza Vali composed The Darkness of Fury in response to the years of violent conflict in the Middle East since 1942. The piece presents players with huge demands. It is metrically complex, exploits the high register of most instruments, and calls for both extremely loud and extremely soft dynamics. After a terse opening tutti, Vali introduces what he calls a “demonic fugue” in the violas, the battle cry that the French call “Groupes de Danses” and the British call “Coup de Grace.” The movement is, in her own words, “a bluesy, nostalgic celebration of the past 100 years of this venerable institution.” The strings begin the movement very quietly, in a hushed, reverent mood, supporting a flute solo that eventually builds to a resonating orchestral climax. This then evolves into a celebratory dance in 7/8 time, and again falls back to the quiet, lush string sound of the opening.

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So that was the first step. The music had been created in the composers’ minds and committed to paper, and now it was our job to interpret what they had written and to give it life. As we worked our way through the Suite in the first rehearsal, I realized that our greatest challenge might lie not in learning the notes (although those were certainly difficult), but rather in capturing the mercurial shifts of mood from one movement to the next. Each part of the Suite presents to the listener an entirely different and self-contained sound world. So the real challenge was to perform a compelling characterization of each movement, while also finding a way to link them together seamlessly.

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It was quite a journey preparing these works in the two weeks leading up to the concert, but we had a huge asset in being able to work with the composers themselves during rehearsals. (Personal interaction with composers is all too rare an occurrence for most performers.) For me, it was an invigorating challenge for a new school year and a fantastic welcome to Carnegie Mellon: the opportunity not only to play new music by living composers, but also to meet those composers and to have their direct guidance on interpretation. It meant that we, the members of the Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic, had the honor of bringing this new music to life.