

September Concert Premiere

by HANNAH WHITEHEAD (MM'14)

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. At the beginning of my first week of classes, I walked into the Great Hall of CFA, and I was startled by the beauty I found there. As my gaze swept upward to the ceiling frescos with their panorama of Arts and Industry, and across to the statues of Caesar Augustus and Sophocles, I had a strong feeling that I would like it here at Carnegie Mellon University.

Of course, for music students, there's always an added element of anticipation at the beginning of a new school year, above and beyond the jitters about classes, exams and new friends: our first orchestra concert. And, even more than that, the first orchestra rehearsal. What's the maestro like? Will I get along with my section? What are we playing?

When I sat down at my stand on the first day of rehearsal for the Carnegie Mellon Philharmonic, I was fairly confident that we'd have no problems—with at least HALF of the program, that is. The second half of our opening night would be Tchaikovsky's broodingly melancholic Fourth Symphony, a work that, while it will always be daunting, was already familiar to many of us. So, with a little woodshedding in the practice room and attention to detail in rehearsal, no problem there. But somehow, I could already tell that the first half of our program might be a different

story. After Tchaikovsky we would venture into uncharted territory. I opened my folder to see four pieces of music, each by a different composer, and each with a somewhat enigmatic title. *Euphonic Blues. Memories Nr. 1—Barcelona 1938. Celebration. The Darkness of Fury.* (That last one gave me an inexplicable but particularly acute feeling of dread. Whether it was because of the title or the extremely fast tempo indication, I'm not sure. Probably both.) What was the connection between them, if any, and what did those titles mean?

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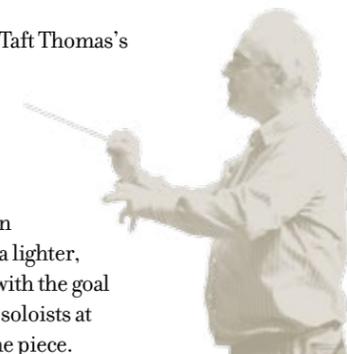
DENIS COLWELL, *Head*

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's founding. Colwell said that “On the

occasion of [our] centennial, it's certainly appropriate to look back over the rich history of the CMU School of Music, but also to look forward. I thought that one way of celebrating where we have arrived, and, more importantly, where we are going, is to cause new music to be created.”

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 these 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 Poulenc. Taft Thomas has said that this piece is “meant to be free of philosophical angst—just plain fun!” She scored the work for a lighter, 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.

Balada's reminiscence of war is followed by another strong contrast: Nancy Galbraith's *Euphonic Blues*, which 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 resounding 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.

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 brutality of this motif is somewhat mitigated by a lyrical passage in the strings, meant to evoke “a ray of hope for peace”: However, lasting resolution proves to be elusive, and the fugue returns, propelling the movement toward its violent conclusion.

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 then 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.

Hannah Whitehead is a first-year graduate student in the cello studio of David Premo.