

tronic one. But a splendid brass section, especially buoyed by Principal Trumpet Kyle Sherman's golden tone and sure breath control, helped compensate. Intonation in winds was sometimes a Problem, forcing Concertmaster Michael Shih to adjust his tuning constantly in his otherwise outstanding, buttery-toned solo.

The Fort Worth Symphony is a very good orchestra with an image problem, and it is struggling to fill seats. It is still recovering from a three-month strike in late 2016, and it has a budget that's less than a third of its neighbor to the east, the Dallas Symphony. Its best young players often migrate to better paying orchestras such as the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony; and it performs in a facility, Bass Hall, whose employees in the name of security wand visitors, check their bags, and measure the bags with a special stick, refusing patrons entry if bags are too big. So the orchestra has substantial obstacles to overcome before it ever plays a note. Yet the musicians manage to overcome many of these obstacles and through innovative programming create concerts that are consistently enjoyable and listenable.

ROBIN COFFELT

Price, Heitzig, and Schuman

Minnesota Orchestra

In 1943 a little-known American composer with three symphonies, two concertos, and a number of choral works to her credit wrote to Serge Koussevitzky, then music director of the Boston Symphony, to introduce herself. Florence Price admitted in her letter to "two handicaps: I am a woman, and I have some Negro blood in me". Now that Koussevitzky knew "the worst" about her, Price said she hoped that he would be able to advance her career.

Born in Little Rock in 1887, Price was the first black woman to be recognized as a symphonic composer and the first to have a composition played by a major symphony orchestra. Though the Chicago Symphony under Frederick Stock premiered Price's Symphony No. 1 in 1933, her music until recent years has remained underplayed and unknown.

Price's impressive Symphony No. 1 took up the second half of "American Expressions", one

of three programs at Orchestra Hall in mid-January by Osmo Vanska and the Minnesota Orchestra devoted to American music. Price's style draws from two chief sources: a romanticism with origins in the 19th Century (Dvorak a strong influence) and an exploration of her own roots. The latter show up in the African drumming that accompanies the brass chorale in the second movement and most vividly in the third movement, 'Juba Dance', which refers to an African dance that involves stomping and clapping and evolves here into ragtime and cakewalk. Price leans perhaps too much on 19th-Century harmonic patterns that seem stodgy today—a predilection she would dispense with in later works—but her sense of timing and structure is skillful, and her orchestration is full of deft and novel touches. Vanska led the orchestra in an energetic, sonorous performance.

The audience responded warmly to Price's music but gave its most enthusiastic response to the newest work on the program, *American Nomad* for trumpet and orchestra by prolific Minnesota composer Steve Heitzig. Commissioned by longtime orchestra supporters Paul and Margot Grangaard and premiered in this hall in 2015, *American Nomad* is a 22-minute concerto described by the composer as a "sonic meditation across the nation". Heitzig cleverly evokes American landscapes, moving from Manhattan's Avenue of the Americas to the ethereal stillness of the California desert with a final stop at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

Heitzig's expanded percussion section—six players—includes such oddities as an iron armature bar from the Statue of Liberty and fallen branches from a Joshua tree. The first movement feels like a summer stroll past a long line of street musicians, each playing his own music. The meditative second movement, 'Little Hymn to the Fields', suggests the lonely stillness of a desert at night.

Orchestra trumpeter Charles Lazarus, who premiered the work four years ago, brought his considerable experience as a jazz player to this kaleidoscopic score, producing a clear, bell-like tone in the strikingly beautiful second movement, following that up with a deep, growling, raspy sound in the finale, evoking a trip to a rowdy waterfront bar late on a Saturday night, with the lower strings providing a funky bass-line accompaniment to Lazarus's exuberant solo playing.

Vanska's well-chosen program opened with one of William Schuman's most distinctive works, *New England Triptych*, an exploration of hymns by the early American composer William Billings.

MICHAEL ANTHONY

Tessa Lark, violin

Albany Symphony

During violinist Tessa Lark's 2014 debut with the Troy Chromatics concert series, she kicked off her shoes just before knocking off a few bluegrass numbers. For her return in 2017, she tapped her foot during her own composition, *Appalachian Fantasy*. The downhome style, though, was only a part of each event. Both recitals also included lyric and attractive performances of works from the canon. Bouncing back and forth between classical and folk music is one of the trademarks of the Indianapolis Violin Competition's 2014 silver medalist [Jan/Feb 2015]. She insists that the thing with her feet just happens naturally when she's caught up with some good music.

Lark returned to the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall on January 5 to join the Albany Symphony for the world premiere performance and recording of *Sky*, a violin concerto by Michael Torke. Tailored specifically to Lark's talents and tastes, the work is a beautifully crafted blend of Torke's propulsive style with the gestures and style of fiddle music.

The opening sounds come from the violin and the tambourine. There's an immediate feel of country music, but also the noble spirit of Copland. Keeping true to the source material, the violin is light and active and remains in a limited melodic range. Yet it's easily heard because the orchestral accompaniment pulses with color and weight yet still remains light and clear. There's plenty of sass along the way. Lark played with apparent ease and unaffected beauty.

The more placid second movement turns to the Irish folk tradition and is lyric and serene. The bluegrass influence is most explicit in the crackling finale, a spirited nonstop dialog between violin and orchestra. The gestures of fiddling get passed around in the orchestra, most obviously in bent trombone notes. Pizzicato phrases from the violin expand into stomps from the orchestra.

Sky is the latest in a long string of Torke commissions from the ASO and its music director David Alan Miller, who put his arm around Torke and called him "about my favorite composer in the world." Their collaboration has resulted in some notable successes, including a beautiful 2005 revival of the one-act opera *Strawberry Fields* and the 2015 piano concerto *Three Manhattan Bridges*, so full of art deco style. The new violin concerto is just as strong and should have some staying power, since it was co-commissioned with five other orchestras.

The evening got off to a mild start with Steven Stucky's Chamber Concerto, which was elegant and beautifully crafted but almost completely lacking in strong ideas or engaging narrative. It was given a pristine performance and will be recorded for a long planned disc of music by the composer, who died in 2016 during his ASO residency year.

Nevertheless, this early January concert seemed to carry the charged optimism of a New Year's celebration. Part of that feel also came from Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, which had the expected racing, pounding, and repetition, but also a feeling of joy and even some bits of humor. The ASO usually serves up one of the master's symphonies per season. A few years back, Miller's Beethoven seemed rushed and constricted; but as with last season's *Eroica*, the pacing here felt right and the players rose to the occasion.

JOSEPH DALTON

Stephane Deneve

St Louis Symphony

Stephane Deneve will officially become the new music director of the St Louis Symphony this fall. In February he spent two weeks guest-conducting Mozart, Vaughan Williams, and Brahms, plus an all-Prokofieff program. He said to the audience, "This will be one of the last times I will be appearing with your orchestra . . ." Pause. Gasp. ". . . as a guest conductor!" Loud applause, which reinforced the talk that Deneve was the overwhelming choice of both the musicians and administration.

Deneve sports a mop of long curly hair that flies nearly horizontally outward and back over his shoulders, and he seems to prefer plain black Nehru jackets over a tux. He speaks to