

Albany Symphony to the rescue

By Andrew L. Pincus

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LENOX — With its opening concert of the season behind it, Berkshire Friends of Music may just be able to take the help-wanted sign out of the window.

The Albany Symphony Orchestra played the role of rescuer on opening night Saturday, substituting at the last minute for the financially disabled St. Cecilia Orchestra. Like the old-time movie hero who rescues the heroine from the tracks just ahead of the onrushing train, the New Yorkers may have cooked up a romance.

The concert, a mostly-strings one given before a rather sparse audience in Seiji Ozawa Hall, was on the low-key side. With one 20th-century exception, conductor David Alan Miller played a program of small-scaled, even intimate works. In the Berkshire debut for both him and the orchestra, moreover, he led with an emphasis more on sympathy than flair.

But the Albany Symphony, in the chamber-orchestra version imported for this occasion, played very well — as well as the St. Cecilia at its best, which was not always the St. Cecilia that Friends of Music got. Except for some blemished intonation in Respighi's "Il Tramonto," the string playing was exemplary in pitch, ensemble and blend.

The youthful Miller — he appears to be about 30 — seated the violins in the classical style, moreover, with the two sections flanking the podium. The resulting transparency of sound produced some especially striking effects in Mozart's Symphony No. 29, the evening's finale (and the only work to call for winds).

Miller conducted the same program he was scheduled to have conducted with the St. Cecilia. Following Albany Symphony custom, he came armed

with a contemporary work, Peter Paul Koprowski's 1996 "Ancestral Voices."

A Pole now living in Ottawa, Canada, Koprowski said in a conversation during intermission that he started out composing in the postwar avant-garde manner championed by such figures as Karlheinz Stockhausen. Although the movement was a necessary historical development, he said, he has moved on to the more open, accessible kind of writing in favor today.

"Ancestral Voices" strikingly confirms that faith in expressivity within intelligibility. Over its 15-minute course, it evokes a variety of past voices, including Renaissance and Russian Orthodox church music, Polish traditions (especially the mazurka) and Shostakovich.

All of these forces come together in a tightly wrought work that is modern in sound and mood yet traditional in its sense of human values. Though the various sections sound disjunct, it is possible to follow the progress from one to the next. Most impressively, the piece makes a strong emotional statement without pandering to an audience.

The performance, only the work's second, sounded secure and powerful, but there may be more bite in the string writing that will come out as players get more experience with it. Koprowski took a bow, and Miller displayed another credential by speaking lucidly yet succinctly about the work from the podium. He described Koprowski as "a towering figure in North American music."

"Il Tramonto" ("The Sunset") sounds like a knockoff of Rich-

ard Strauss' "Four Last Songs" — until you realize that the Respighi was composed in 1914 34 years before the Strauss. Or the other hand, the piece sounds nothing like the splashy noisy Respighi of the well known "Pines of Rome" and "Fountains of Rome."

Whoever borrowed what, "Il Tramonto's" slow, mournful setting of a Shelley poem about the death of young love is not an easy assignment for the mezzo-soprano soloist. Lucille Beer met the challenge with affecting sympathy and a creamy voice that was appealing in the softer passages but tended to turn hard when pushed.

As an encore, Beer sang "Doppo notte" from Handel's opera "Ariodante." She's an interesting singer, but her feeling for the florid coloratura style soared more easily than her voice did.

Miller opened with Elgar's Serenade for String Orchestra, nicely catching the wistful Edwardian lyricism but pulling around the elegy's sighing hesitations a bit too much. His Mozart at the end balanced vigor with grace. There is more to be made of this youthful music's drama of sound and gesture, but as Miller led his players through it with smiles and clarity (but no baton), they seemed a team that might well find a second home in the Berkshires.