

13th WASBE Conference 2007: Killarney, Ireland

Louisville Gives a Distinguished Performance

Concert #4 (Monday)

Chris Woodruff

On the second evening of the conference, delegates and concert goers from across County Kerry were treated to an exciting performance by the University of Louisville Wind Ensemble under the direction of Frederick Speck. The program, at first glance, resembled a Rick Steves podcast library: short, pithy works by composers from far and wide. Notable, however, was the appearance of two European premiers—Karl Husa's *Cheetah* and Matthew Tommasini's *Three Spanish Songs*.

By the end of the first half of the performance, the members of the ensemble had distinguished themselves with a presentation of assertive musicality and powerful precision. The concert opened with Bright Sheng's colorful fanfare *La'i*, which promised the audience would want neither for horn nor trumpet sound in the program to follow. The flexible Louisville band proceeded with a number of chamber compositions, beginning with the *Three Spanish Dances*.

Tommasini's setting of works by several notable Spanish poets was sung with great passion and command by Edith Davis Tidwell. The piece was originally a cycle for voice and harp, but was reworked for a new palette at the urging of Michael Haithcock. The ensemble—Flute, Oboe/English Horn, Clarinet/Bass Clarinet, Horn, Trumpet, Trombone, Piano, and 4 percussion—performed with tremendous sensitivity and stylistic empathy. The work takes full advantage of the colors available to these instrumentalists, the piano making its thunderous presence known to good effect in the second movement. The third movement closes with a bit of text-painting as rising layers of ostinati depict the apparition of a floating child.

Dr. Speck's program continued with a back-to-back presentation of Penderecki's *Entrata* and Takemitsu's *Day Signal*. These, again featured excellent brass ensemble and solo playing.

The conductor's own *Night Moves* brought together his chamber ensemble with marimba soloist Greg Byrne and cellist Paul York. Excellent timing among the marimba, harp, bass and piano players contributed a wonderful Latin feel to the composition. The cello provided a beautiful soaring lyric to contrast with the rhythmic energy.

The second half of the program featured a work completed last year with the rather un-Husian title, *Cheetah*. The 1999 commission for the piece was intended for reduced forces, but the composer felt his ideas could be better realized with a full-band scoring. The result is less a narrative than a structured 'impression' that evokes the building energy of the chase and concludes as our imagined protagonist has been unsuccessful in the kill. Still, from our perspective a satisfying work, especially with tonight's performance, very capably concluded with a whisper of sustained octaves in the upper woodwinds.

The balance of the program, comprised of decidedly less weighty material, offered a sampling of American composers including Joan Tower, Morton Gould, Steve Rouse and an audience-pleasing Charles Ives offered by guest conductor Dennis Johnson.

By the end of the evening the University of Louisville Wind Ensemble had demonstrated an exciting and joyful, yet earnest conviction to an interesting and challenging program.