

## Arts Review: Austin Symphony Orchestra With Robert McDuffie, Violin



Dell Hall at the Long Center, November 21, 2008  
By Michael Kellerman

Perhaps my New England roots are to blame, but for me, there's a seismic cultural shift that comes with the arrival of cooler times in Austin. The thinning tree cover and the shift from light to dark seem to usher in a reflective mood for the city.

To accompany a crisp autumn night this past Friday, maestro Peter Bay programmed a hearty mix of Central Europe-inspired works for the Austin Symphony Orchestra's latest concert, as well as an Austin welcome for one of the world's top violinists.

With a résumé as impressive as any virtuoso performing today, Robert McDuffie came to the Dell Hall stage as part of a 16-city U.S. tour, bringing with him the *Violin Concerto* by Miklos Rozsa. A rarely performed orchestral piece by the three-time Oscar-winning film composer, the concerto was originally written for Jascha Heifetz for a 1956 Dallas premiere. The piece celebrates the dense modality of Hungarian folk music, as well as the furious brilliance of the late instrumental master.

Oscillating between lush lyricism and stunning energy, this powerful concerto deserves a wider audience. McDuffie, a fine ambassador, made of the piece a signature personal statement, pairing near perfect intonation with brilliant technical flourishes. Though attention fell naturally on the soloist, the work posed a tremendous technical challenge to the supporting players of the ASO, who triumphed under Bay's baton.

As the third movement began, a neighboring audience member muttered, "Looks like we're in for a ride." What followed was quite a ride, indeed. Stormy, furious, and thrilling from the first bars, the outer sections of the movement showcased McDuffie's mastery of spiccato, balanced with a tender, evocative rendering of the unsettled middle passage. As the concerto's last notes reverberated in the hall, the crowd cried out for an encore.

As McDuffie returned to the stage, I wondered, "How do you up the ante after such a towering piece?" Enter the Kreisler *Scherzo*, a powerhouse tour of the violin's technical capabilities. McDuffie transcended the solo piece, scoring a winning postscript to an exciting performance. As I suspect others who hadn't heard of McDuffie before this concert felt, I'm very curious to hear more.

For the second act, ASO took the stage for Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*. To many his magnum opus, the work presents the composer at his most inventive, assured, and emotionally diverse, with sweeping brushstrokes of color and texture. Though officially in E-minor, the first two movements flirt with many modes, highlighting Brahms' passion for Central European folk traditions. The third departs abruptly, joyously rooted in C-major, changing course yet again to usher in the masterful, brooding final movement.

A roller-coaster passacaglia of more than 30 variations on a theme from earlier in the symphony, the fourth movement's subtler moments exposed some intonation issues within the ensemble, particularly in the woodwind section. On the other hand, balance was strong throughout the later variations leading into the grand final statement. The solo flute variation was notably memorable, executed gorgeously by Rebecca Powell Garfield.

It's exciting to watch the ASO accompany its proud new home with concerts that exemplify the artistic spectrum of the city it represents: new sounds, new faces, old favorites, and a curious ear to the seasons still yet to come.