

ASO proves symphonic music is alive, lots of fun

By Nancy Raabe
News staff writer

There are people who claim that live symphonic music is ailing. Symphony orchestras, they insist, are out of sync with their times, out of step with public taste, and serve only to keep time-encrusted classics securely fastened to historic pedestals, safely removed from the rabble.

Those with that opinion just might have found themselves singing a different tune after Thursday night's jaunty, jazzy concert of "Industrial Funk" played by resourceful and dedicated members of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra. Before about 250 people in Birmingham-Southern College's Hill Recital Hall, Birmingham's symphony took a giant step toward relevance, accessibility and meeting the public on its own terms.

In fact, the whole evening might well serve as a blueprint for the kind of approach that orchestras everywhere would do well to either adopt or adapt.

First, there was the program. ASO principal conductor Mark Gibson put together a lineup inspired by the 20th century's greatest musical mind, Igor Stravinsky, that led us through a stimulating thicket of recent works by some of today's hottest young composers back to the master himself.

Michael Torke's *Adjustable Wrench* proved a deftly constructed canvas woven of cheerful melodic and rhythmic repetitions and cheekily suggestive harmonies. Dorothy Hindman's lush, broadly scaled *Chemistry* reveled in long lines, subtly changing colors and exquisite chordal sonorities.

Michael Daugherty's impishly irreverent *Dead Elvis* injected the medieval Latin chant *Dies irae* ("day of wrath") with an attitude fully worthy of the King himself. David Cutler's *Vango Tan Gogh* offered an explosion of Argentinian ardor laced freely with pop, country and western, jazz, heavy metal and classical elements. Simon Bainbridge's *Concertante in moto perpetuo* tantalized the ear with the increasing density of its incessant rhythmic

Music Review

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THE ALABAMA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, conducted by Mark Gibson, in a program of music by Daugherty, Hindman, Torke, Bainbridge, Cutler and Stravinsky. At Hill Recital Hall, Birmingham-Southern College, Thursday evening.

(Key to rating: ★★★★★, excellent; ★★★, good; ★★, fair; ★, poor.)

activity. And Stravinsky's fleeting six-minute *Symphony No. 2* for small orchestra showed the master at his pithiest and wittiest, a perfect complement to the rest of the program.

Then, there was the presentation. The musicians were dressed in comfortable street clothes, which contributed greatly to the evening's overall feel of familiarity and accessibility. Most of the audience was correspondingly dressed down, including symphony patrons who probably would be seen in black in the ASO's regular venues.

And talk about fun. Only at a live concert could you see Elvis himself, armed with a bassoon, strut out in wig, sunglasses and gold-embroidered white suit (all right, it was really Jack Sharp) and hurl the wig to the floor before launching into a series of double-reed gyrations.

Only at a live concert could you cheer as percussionist Bill Williams threw his sticks noisily to the floor at the giddy conclusion of *Vango Tan Gogh*, or hoot appreciatively at the red-hot playing by pianist Lester Seigel in the same piece.

In all objectivity, though, for the most part the music was less memorable than the attending antics. The test for the ASO, as for its colleagues throughout the industry, will lie in how successfully it will be able to infuse the excitement and sense of occasion that permeated this concert into performances of mainstream repertory upon which the symphonic tradition hinges. It can be done.