

POWERFUL PISTON FROM THE ASO

Carnegie Hall, New York, March 29, 2011

Walter Piston probably would have been as surprised as anyone at an entire program devoted to his orchestral music, but that only made conductor Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra's March 29 Carnegie Hall concert all the more intriguing. Certainly the program was well chosen for variety: the Piano Concertino followed by the Second Symphony, and then after intermission, the First Violin Concerto and the Fourth Symphony. Interestingly, Piston's two most popular pieces, the Three New England Sketches and the ballet *The Incredible Flutist*, were omitted. This was all serious, abstract stuff, begging the question of whether or not Piston's fit and trim, American neoclassical style has enough meat on its musical bones to sustain an entire evening. It does.

Indeed, perhaps the most lingering memories for many listeners (the concert was gratifyingly well-attended by an enthusiastic audience) will not be of those patented rhythmically zippy allegros, but rather the passionate intensity of the two symphonic slow movements. That of Symphony No. 2 has to be one of the most melodically beautiful in 20th century American music, while Symphony No. 4 flirts with atonality, but only to enhance the movement's darkly brooding atmosphere. In short, Piston's music really does have the necessary range of feeling to keep the audience satisfied over four substantial works.

Given the unfamiliarity of the music, the performances were very fine. Botstein rightly set the bar high for his players, and they responded with bold and exciting performances, urgent but not lacking in subtlety. The solo woodwinds did particularly well in the slow movements of the symphonies. Soloists Blair McMillen (piano) and Miranda Cuckson (violin) distinguished themselves in the concerted works, and again, one can only congratulate them for taking the time to master off-the-beaten-path pieces such as these. God knows when they will have the chance to play them again. The First Violin Concerto, particularly, sounded like a major contribution to the literature. In short, Botstein made an excellent case for this music's return to the standard repertoire of (at least) American symphony orchestras, and no praise could be higher.

David Hurwitz