



MSO: Geoffrey Gordon's Trombone Concerto, Megumi Kanda a hit January 15th, 2011 | By Tom Strini

Geoffrey Gordon's new concerto for Megumi Kanda, the MSO's principal trombonist, was a big success at Friday night's premiere with the Milwaukee Symphony. That says something not only about their skill and artistry, but also about the open ears of the MSO audience, the commitment of the orchestra, and the great insight and effort of guest conductor James Gaffigan.

The charms of this 25-minute piece are abundant but not obvious. It hasn't a single hummable tune, its harmonies are unconventional, it's atonal, and you can't dance to it.

It seems, at first, to live in a free-roving Expressionist sound world in which the composer seizes one idea after another intuitively. The first movement jingles, squawks, cries, shimmers, and groans. Kanda responds to this enchanted, scary forest of exotic orchestral sounds with virtuoso declamations couched in speech rhythm. Bar lines and time signatures adorn the score, but the music feels free-floating and ad lib.

At first, the thing amazes in the way of a Rousseau painting; Gordon drops you in a fantastical place and you stand there agape, as it were. But unlike paintings, music unfolds in time. At 25 minutes, the concerto must accumulate meaning in ways that balance surprise with coherence. (If a piece doesn't do all that, it rewards our attention with nothing, with the too obvious or with the far-fetched, and we stop listening.)

Gordon's music adds up. In the first movement, those declamations, which at first seem arbitrary, come to sound like a grand argument built up across time. The assorted jungle sounds recur, not to form a clear pattern, but to suggest an ecology. The second movement pits jaw-dropping lyrical trombone themes against ringing cluster chords, mostly in high register and often laced with harp and metal percussion. I assumed that these complexes were all about generalized sonority and that the specific pitches didn't much matter. But the more I heard them, the more I realized that they had specific personalities and the more I could hear the architecture in these quivering, nine-pitch towers of sound. Good music rewards attention with the pleasure of discovery. In Gordon's concerto, there's always more to it than meets the ear, and he gives you a chance to hear what that "more" is.

Fierce rhythmic drive, absent to this point, charges in with the finale. Not content to gallop straight to the finish line, Gordon peppers the third movement with metric shifts and gnarly rhythmic snags. Bumps and hairpin turns make the ride wild as well as speedy. A central interlude takes us briefly back to the feeling of the first movement with entirely different material, and an epic coda blows the doors off the place.

Yes, it's quite a piece. And if a more difficult and elaborate trombone part exists, I haven't heard it. Kanda's astonishing command, great vigor and interpretive focus made the strongest possible case for the new concerto. Do go to the repeat performance Saturday; you might never hear trombone playing like this again.

James Gaffigan, who impressed conducting the Itzhak Perlman special Thursday night, impressed even more on Friday. He knew Gordon's daunting score well and got his eyes up to engage the orchestra and communicate the impetus of Gordon's musical gestures to the group. The players bought into the piece and played it forcefully, though there were a few moments where you could almost feel them doggedly counting just to get it right. I expect they'll own it entirely by Saturday night.

Gaffigan reprised Mozart's Symphony No. 41 ("Jupiter") from Thursday, and showed the his vibrant, clear reading then was no fluke. His taut, energized gestures and body language came back to him as taut, energized sound from the orchestra. The pliant, attentive and highly skilled MSO held the road like a Ferrari through Mozart's turns and Gaffigan's interpretive twists.

Charles Ives' Symphony No. 3 ("The Camp Meeting") opened this challenging and varied program. This is gentle, nostalgic Ives, filtering old hymns and camp songs of his youth through his own Cubist musical sensibility. A tune will play along normally for a while, then split into two different keys, fragment, reassemble, then fade away like an elusive memory. Lovely.