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Review: Miami Symphony Orchestra chases after light

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The Miami Symphony Orchestra's three-hour "Made in America" marathon was a microcosm of the country: sprawling, ambitious, and wildly diverse, with some elements that failed to cohere.

The good news is that under Eduardo Marturet's leadership, the orchestra has markedly improved in technical gleam. The charismatic Venezuelan conductor led a high-voltage performance of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 Sunday night at the Lincoln Theatre that proved an apt showcase for the MSO's lustrous violins and vastly upgraded horns. Marturet could have reined in the trumpets more firmly, and there's still work to be done with the violas and some of the winds, but, by any account, this was a thrilling, if boisterous performance.

The symphony's efforts at bridge-building beyond its traditional Latin audience is evident in its burgeoning association with the University of Miami's Frost School of Music. The school and MSO recently unveiled a partnership in which a Frost teaching assistant will serve as the symphony's assistant conductor for two years. Christian Grasses is the first candidate to be selected and was on the podium for the evening's centerpiece featuring the Frost's peripatetic dean, jazz pianist Shelly Berg.

The "jazz dean" has said that he doesn't believe in dividing music by category, and as a classically trained pianist who performs jazz, he surely embodies that eclectic philosophy.

There is no denying Berg's jazz chops, and, along with his hyperkinetic stage presence, the speed, dexterity and rhythmic ingenuity of his keyboard work were often remarkable Sunday night, with less flashy but solid contributions from trio colleagues Gary Thomas on bass and drummer Daniel Susnjar.

Yet, while Berg's reputation as a jazz musician is secure, his arrangements illustrate the difficulties of mixing free-form improvisation with notated orchestral parts. Scored for large orchestra, the overblown symphonic backing to his jazz retooling of Paul McCartney's *Blackbird* largely buried the simple lyricism of the original song. While Berg's piano work was consistently inventive, the arrangement of Faure's *Pavane* -- complete with maracas -- seemed even more over the top, and the trumpet scoring made the delicate original sound like a banal Christmas carol.

Berg premiered his *Incandescent, Iridescent, Effervescent*, which showed a somewhat more closely knit unity between his frenzied extempore solo work and the orchestra. But here, too, the Miami Symphony players were largely limited to empty vamping or sitting still while the trio played, and the souped-up scoring sounded, frankly, like a rather treacly brand of dated 1970s symphonic pop. Grasses did what he had to do well, but what could the young conductor have accomplished with more substantial music?

The evening began with the Florida premiere of Joseph Schwantner's *Chasing Light*. The admirable Ford Made in America program enlists a leading U.S. composer to write a new composition that will then be performed by 58 smaller-budget ensembles that could never afford such a commission on their own.

Inspired by the natural beauty of rural New Hampshire, where Schwantner lives, *Chasing Light* opens with characteristic drive and percussion, kicked off by aggressive, asymmetric timpani and bass drum.

The second section forms a peaceful contrast, with bucolic winds and cooling piano cascades building to a striding Copland-esque climax. More ominous passages return in the third section, and the finale recaps the preceding material and ends in confident optimism.

Despite its quasi-ceremonial commission, *Chasing Light* is an inspired work, smartly scored, deftly varied, accessible yet not vacuous. Under Marturet's energetic direction, the MSO gave Schwantner's music an exuberant local premiere.

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