

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

NOVEMBER 29, 2006



Courtesy of Brian Wilbur Grundstrom

A new, modern composition by Dupont Circle resident Brian Wilbur Grundstrom, right, debuted earlier this month at Lisner Auditorium. Nancia D'Alimonte, left, conducted.

David Brown is on vacation. His column will resume next week.

With 'Jubilation,' Dupont composer strikes a chord

By **MARION LEVY**
Current Correspondent

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

A car's windshield frames a city street veiled by a thin, evening drizzle. Seen through the intermittent swipes of wipers, a young woman with an umbrella walks on the wet sidewalk, unaware of the car slowly following her. Cut to green hills. Sheep scatter beneath a low-flying plane. Men in peasant garb look up while walking horses down a steep mountain trace.

No, it's not the opening of a new James Bond movie. These are images brought to a reporter's mind by "Jubilation! Dance for Orchestra," a modern orchestral piece written by Dupont Circle composer Brian Wilbur Grundstrom. It was performed for the first time on Nov. 19. The George Washington University Symphony Orchestra played the piece at Lisner Auditorium, sandwiched between two pillars of classicism: Mozart

and Beethoven.

"It's a modern piece," said Kat Overland, who plays French horn in the orchestra. "And it sounds unusual, especially when you put it in between two really standard pieces like the Mozart and the Beethoven."

If Beethoven's "Pastoral" symphony is meant to evoke images of one day in the country — a babbling brook, country dance, thunderstorm and following calm, according to the program — Grundstrom's "Jubilation" is a summer's worth of grass caught in time-lapse, bursting forth in a plush field.

What is so unusual about the music? Grundstrom's piece has frequent changes in meter, often with five beats to the measure instead of the more standard three or four. And while avoiding a key signature, it remains tonal, i.e., recognizable as music.

"What's nice about it is, it's new music, but it's not ivory-tower music," said conduc-

tor Nancia D'Alimonte. "You know, it's accessible. An audience can actually listen to it and think 'Wow, I like that part.'"

"It's contemporary, but not so modern that it's unpleasant at all," said Jim Kofski, a violinist in the audience. "It's really delightful to listen to ... It's exciting to hear a world premiere, and then a Washington composer, too — I enjoyed that."

Grundstrom was classically trained in piano and music theory at Gettysburg College and he is now focusing on music for film. He attended an American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers film music workshop this spring, and he has written music for three short films.

"I've always felt that my music had some cinematic quality to it," said Grundstrom. "There's a certain joy to putting your music to film and the power you actually have over that film."

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JUBILATION

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Grundstrom said there are three major components playing into the creation of his composition: his love of orchestra, his interest in cinematic or programmatic style and his knowledge of computers (he works as a database administrator for the Washington Opera).

"First of all, there's something about orchestra. Don't ask me why, but I wanted to write for it," said Grundstrom. "And then there's the quality of [my music] which I think is very cinematic ... The third component is the technical aspect. I work in IT, so I have the skills to put a studio together."

Grundstrom has two computers

in his home studio that work in tandem, enabling him to sample orchestra sounds that he can re-create and manipulate and then apply to his music. He sent D'Alimonte a computer rendering of the piece for her first consideration, but she learned the score the old-fashioned way: by sight reading.

"That's how I learn scores, of course," said D'Alimonte. "You study the scores. You hear it — I hear it in my head."

So although both composer and conductor had "heard" the music before Sunday, the world premiere was something else altogether.

"When you're dealing with a world premiere, you can't hear it, because no one's ever played it," said D'Alimonte.

"I thought it was fabulous," said

Peggy Long, a member of the audience and also head of the Women In Film and Video Screenwriting Roundtable, of which Grundstrom is a member. "I found it very much like life: all of a sudden you're headed this way ... and then it goes that way. ... That his music took me to places [when] I was going another direction was actually a jubilation."

"There are a lot of composers, but an opportunity to be heard is something," said D'Alimonte.

"You don't know where this is going to go. I mean, this might be it. This might be the last thing. But it might be the beginning of something extraordinary. You just never know. And actually, it was extraordinary, because we were the first orchestra to play that piece."