

2007 FALL PREVIEW | CLASSICAL MUSIC/JAZZ

MADE IN THE U.S.A.: Surprise, surprise! American music dominates this season's repertoire

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BY MARK STRYKER

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

New American music has played second fiddle for so long to European masterworks in classical music that it's big news when the Yankees make a sudden advance. So if you're looking for a headline summarizing metro Detroit's 2007-08 classical season, it would be that America is on the march.

From the region's largest institutions to smaller grassroots groups, everyone seems to be getting into the act. It's not clear why American music is suddenly taking center stage, though there is some evidence that local classical music leaders are beginning to connect the dots between contemporary music, revitalizing the largely staid repertoire and appealing to a wider audience.

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Certainly, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, which boasts its most creative programming in years, appears to have gotten the memo, striking a healthier balance between familiar staples and music borne from contemporary American life. One of the DSO's most sweeping initiatives is a season-long survey of John Corigliano's three symphonies in honor of the eclectic composer's 70th birthday. Another DSO project includes the world premiere of the commissioned orchestral work by Stacy Garrop, winner of the orchestra's inaugural Elaine Lebenbom Memorial Competition for Women Composers.

Several longstanding commissioning projects are also coming to fruition this season, a serendipitous twist of fate helping to explain what on the surface might seem to be a sudden appearance of a new opera and a gaggle of chamber music. In October, Michigan Opera Theatre gives the highly anticipated world premiere of "Cyrano" by David DiChiera, the company's genial general director, who was trained as a composer long before he made building MOT (and the Detroit Opera House) his life's work.

Richard Danielpour's "Book of Hours" (2006) for piano quartet is another example, the result of the Chamber Music Society of Detroit's participation in a large-scale commissioning project with presenters from around the country. The metro Detroit performance by the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and Kirsten Johnson is in December. Two world premieres this season by the Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings -- by Andrea Reinkemeyer (October) and Matthew Tommasini (April) -- are similarly the result of a consortium of co-commissioners.

Birthdays are another factor. Corigliano is part of a prodigious class of important U.S. composers who turn 70 in 2008. In June, the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival plans to honor four of them -- Corigliano, William Bolcom, John Harbison and Joan Tower.

Bolcom, a Pulitzer Prize winner at the University of Michigan, is getting special treatment locally. The DSO performs his Symphony No. 7 and the Guarneri String Quartet and Johannes String Quartet play his new Octet for the University Musical Society in Ann Arbor.

Finally, some groups have always championed new American music and 2007-08 reflects their continuing missions. UMS, for example, is presenting the vibrant new music sextet Eighth Blackbird, whose irresistible program includes minimalist Steve Reich's "Double Sextet" (2007) and music by Reich's stylistic progeny David Lang, Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe. On the grassroots level, Chamber Music at the Scarab Club will perform the young Detroit-born composer Sean Hickey's Concerto for Clarinet and String Quartet in November.

Contact **MARK STRYKER** at 313-222-6459 or stryker@freepress.com.

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