

Voices

A passionate performance

--Mike Masterson

I wasn't sure what to expect the other night when I plopped into a fourth-row seat for my first experience with the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas (SoNA). By the time this initial performance of the season ended two hours later, I was on my feet with hundreds of others in the audience to applaud one of the finest musical events I've seen anywhere. The Walton Arts Center in Fayetteville could just as easily have been the concert halls of Manhattan, Boston or Chicago on this night. What an elegant and rousing performance by a first-class symphony.

I knew we were in for something intriguing when the tall conductor and music director Paul Haas, a graduate of Yale and the Juilliard School, strode briskly onto the stage with an ear-to-ear grin and a clear passion for what was about to unfold. The *New York Times* has written of this symphonic musician in a tux with tails: "Haas is surely on the brink of a noteworthy career."

From my eyes and ears, he's already arrived.

It's difficult to express in words the depth of Haas' ability to immerse himself both in the music and musicians under his guidance. He not only sets the pace and tempo, he becomes them, up on that little podium with baton in hand, hair bouncing, sweeping arms and hands highlighting and emphasizing every rousing crescendo down to the faintest of notes.

Of course, what would anyone expect from Haas, a young father with one daughter (about to be two), whose star-studded resume includes performances with the likes of the National Symphony Orchestra and musical direction at Carnegie Hall?

Haas told me afterwards that he's originally from San Francisco but now lives in New York City. He also said he will head back to Fayetteville every four to six weeks as the season develops.

His remarkable performance on this particular evening was unfolding right here in the Ozarks before an appreciative crowd that rose to its feet to applaud and cheer on several occasions.

Other than the members of this symphony, who come from cities across the region (as well as Tulsa and Little Rock), the highlight of the evening came in the form of 22-year-old prodigy cellist Sebastian Baverstam, who studies today with Paul Katz at the New England Conservatory in Boston.

Because I'm not a music critic, and don't pretend or intend to become one, I can only tell you what this man presented in my own words.

"Jumpin Jephosaphat!" leaps readily to mind, as does "Mercy!" You could tell as Baverstam smiled and gently nodded his readiness to Haas when he took his seat and began playing the "Concerto for Cello and Orchestra," penned by Sir Edward Elgar about a century ago, that this man was focused.

As his performance drew on, I became amazed at the depth of this man's ability and the visceral attachment he displayed to his cello. He closed his eyes without a shred of sheet music before him and

played for at least 20 minutes, expressing a depth of emotion in his face I never realized existed in music. In fact, it was evident that he was literally pouring himself out onto these strings from the depth of his soul.

One observer later said Baverstam, who has pages of honors and accolades beginning from his initial concert at age 6, was “making love to his cello.” Another said his transitions during the concert “flowed like warm butter into the auditorium.” I was simply stunned that a man could produce such transcendent melody on a richly polished box with horse hairs and strings.

In summary, my friends, I congratulate Walton Arts Center executive director Karen Kapella and her staff as well as the center’s board of directors for having the wisdom and foresight to bring such world-class talent to Fayetteville.

Oh yeah, and for those who may feel like the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas might be a little too “high-brow” for their tastes, the symphony closed by playing the Arkansas fight song in several ways. One hasn’t heard our rousing fight song until one hears it played on such as the violin, cello, oboe and harp. You can check it out for yourself on YouTube, where the clip has nearly 30,000 hits.

For me, this was yet another stroke of marketing genius by Haas, who showed time and time again that he not only possesses supreme confidence onstage, but that he’s an expert at relating to his audience, as well as to the symphony musicians he clearly appreciates.”

He even took time to single out various musicians and sections for applause. My friend Rich Heckman said the only one the conductor inadvertently overlooked was the musician on the timpani (kettledrums). Stephen Craft showed just how effective a sensitive touch on that deep, rolling instrument can be in any top-flight symphony.

And, my friends, I would match this symphony against any such group of artful musicians in the country.

The next SoNA concert is on December 10 at 7:30. My heartfelt recommendation: Be in a seat and see for yourself.

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Mike Masterson is opinion editor of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette’s Northwest edition.

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