



# Youth Orchestra

## MYS Superb in World Premier Standing Ovation for Composer Shelley Hanson

by Rachel Brudnoy

The Minnesota Youth Symphonies, lead by Claudette and Manny Laureano, began their 1999–2000 concert season at Orchestra Hall on November 14 featuring their four orchestras. The numbers and depth of the string talent performing in each orchestra is a credit to the private string teaching, the strong school string programs and the widespread parent support these programs have in this region. The orchestras conducted by Manny and Claudette Laureano, James Bartsch and Patricia Kelly demonstrated the depth of talented young musicians this program is nourishing and training.

Along with its program of teaching orchestral repertoire, MYS is also supporting music by a commissioning program. For their current season, MYS selected Shelley Hanson, whose works have been performed throughout the United States and in Europe, Japan, and Latin America. The four movement work entitled *Islas y Montañas* was premiered by the Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of maestro Manny Laureano. The concentrated excitement on the faces of this elite ensemble could

only be matched by both their electric performance and the spontaneous rising of the audience at its spectacular conclusion. It was most fortunate that Orchestra Hall has no chandeliers to come tumbling down!

The first movement is called *Tocata* (the Spanish spelling) and all the players of the orchestra become an Afro-Caribbean drum ensemble. This movement could be performed by a string orchestra with percussion because no wind instruments are actually played. The performers, along with the percussion section, use sounds such as hand clapping, stamping feet, and tapping on instruments and music stands. The string players use wooden dowels on open strings for a percussive *collegno* effect to spare their bows. This movement is a great way to teach rhythms and it had a tremendous effect on the audience as I could feel the few who forgot not to applaud between movements were really expressing the awed collective breath holding of the rest of us. This first movement may be the most difficult of the four because of the rhythmic demands but it is most worthwhile doing because the students

learn to fit in with rhythmic accuracy.

The second movement based on Peruvian Folk melodies is called *Volver a la Montaña (Return to the Mountain)*. It requires two good flute players who end the piece playing only the head joints, and two harp parts cued into the string parts if there are no harpists available. A slow melodic beginning and ending frame a faster dance-like middle section which introduces us to the beautiful melodies of the ancient Incas. The end has a magnificent echo effect, as if you are leaving the Andes Mountains and hear the muted trumpets echo the flutes by a half a beat. This movement does not have huge technical demands on the strings and is playable by a high school program with some accomplished players.

The *Seis Mapayé* is written in the style of a Puerto Rican song and dance form. Each section of the orchestra, including the celli and bass, is featured with the wonderful melody of this third movement. The rhythms are written to make them sound improvised as is the vocal style in Puerto Rico, and because of that, the counting is quite sophisticated. The unexpected ending to this exuberant movement is delightful.

Technically the most difficult, *La Tumba de Alejandro Garcia Caturla* requires an excellent wind and brass section. A tribute piece (like the French “tombeau”) to a Cuban composer who was murdered in 1939 when he was about to become internationally famous, its powerful impact comes in part from the rhythms of the Santeria religion’s ritual drumming. There are many dissonant chords in the harmony which are in the style of Caturla, but always in a framework of tonality. The solo English horn which starts the movement was

Shelley Hanson’s compositions have been performed throughout the United States and in Europe, Japan and Latin America. Her work for strings *Fiddler’s Contest* was recently performed by the Wayzata Orchestra at the MMEA convention. Also a clarinetist, conductor and record producer, she is a member of *Klezmer, & All That Jazz*. She has appeared as a soloist in her *Concerto for Klezmer Band and Orchestra* with the Milwaukee Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Ocean City Pops Orchestra, The Women’s Philharmonic (San Francisco) and Minneapolis Pops Orchestra, among others. Music she wrote, performed and recorded in her recording studio, Crisis Studios, was featured in a National Public Radio broadcast of the classic play *The Dybbuk* starring Ed Asner, Carl Reiner and Theodore Bikel. She received the Ph.D. in Performance, Music Theory and Music Literature from Michigan State University and is on the faculty of Macalester College in St. Paul. She is represented by Rile Artists Management.

played beautifully by Elizabeth England. Although this work is technically difficult for wind and percussion players, and counting is difficult for all sections, it's rewarding for its audience effect.

Each of these movements can stand alone in any performance and each has a dimension of learning that many music educators seek in their programs. This work contains the traditions of the Afro-Caribbean, the native mountain peoples of Peru, and the Spanish influence in Puerto Rico; and the Caturra tribute combines them all with the Latin American classical music tradition. Sensitively

conducted by Manny Laureano, and played with impressive concentration and intensity by these outstanding high school students, the premiere performance of *Islas y Montañas* merits hearty congratulations to the MYS, Mr. Laureano and Dr. Hanson.

MYS will receive national attention for the piece when it performs in Sarasota Florida as part of the June 21-28 National Youth Orchestra Festival, sponsored by the American Symphony Orchestra League and the West Florida Symphony Orchestra. The MYS Symphony will perform the entire *Islas y Montañas*

in concert and the final movement will be broadcast live on National Public Radio on Sunday June 25 on Christopher O'Reilly's show *From the Top*. This first class work deserves many future performances.

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