

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

KATRINA AND THE RESURGENT LOUISIANA PHILHARMONIC

I thought I'd share with you an experience of birth and renewal – a story of creation, personal sacrifice, coming together and healing. In this case it was a piece of music that was born – my own Seventh Symphony - and an orchestra that was renewed through the gift of the musicians' talents and the re-commitment of their mission to not let orchestral music die in New Orleans.

The transmutation from my dots and lines on the pages of my score to a live performance imbued with energy and power – this was the result of the collective artistry of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra – an ensemble that seemingly had expired the day Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans last August, unleashing a city-killing deluge.

What these musicians have gone through in the last nine months is too harrowing and incredible for me to accurately describe in detail; I can only relate a few examples. The timpanist, James Atwood – a phenomenal musician – had his four drums stored in the basement of the Orpheum Theatre in the central business district of New Orleans. This former vaudeville house was an acoustical marvel, but was in need of serious refurbishing, with a wheezing air conditioning system and rancid carpeting, to name two of the most obvious assaults on the concert-going experience. When the levees broke, flooding the city, the building was inundated from the basement to the orchestra-seating level. Now, the building stands vacant, with the doors open to passers-by. The mold has reached the level of the balcony and threatens to cover every inch of the place, like some dread alien life form. The theatre's owners didn't have flood insurance and now can't afford the estimated five million dollars it would take to rehabilitate it. Jim lost all his percussion equipment in the flood.

The orchestra's music library, consisting of orchestral scores – some rare and irreplaceable, like Gottschalk's and other early 19th century native New Orleans works - and parts to hundreds of pieces, was also lost. An orchestra builds its programming on such irreplaceable materials. To rent or buy such a library, containing all the accumulated phrasings, string bowings and

detailed interpretive directions – the accumulated wisdom of dozens of conductors over fifty years - would be impossible.

By now, we've heard countless stories of the suffering and hardship caused by Katrina. Why is this any different? Because to play music in any circumstance is to bring new life, in the form of emotive sonorous expression, into the world, to give the best of one's self to spiritually awaken and give solace to others. Consider the loss of all that you own (home, memorabilia, car,) including your musical legacy in the form of the instrument you play, (a rare and historically important violin or double-bass,) no place to perform even if you could and an undetermined audience for your music. What degree of heroism would it take to survive all that and still have the burning desire to make music – to create – under such conditions? This is bravery and commitment of the highest order.

This Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra was not going to die. Reborn in 1990 from the bankrupt New Orleans Symphony, it had survived fiscal and venue crises before. Now, more than ever, the musicians were determined to persist. They performed in a highly visible joint concert with the Nashville Symphony and in a nationally televised PBS extravaganza with the New York Philharmonic last December. Native sons Wynton Marsalis and Aaron Neville gave of their talents to perform with the orchestra, raising hundreds of thousand of dollars – all going to help the musicians stave off deprivation and loss of spirit.

It worked. In March, the reconstituted LPO presented their first concerts of its curtailed 2005-'06 season to packed houses. They performed in warehouses, in churches, in what remained of the auditorium of devastated Tulane University and in the theatre at Loyola University.

And now, my own small part in the rebirth of this undaunted ensemble. I know practically each one of the musicians in the orchestra – 65 people. Some were my students at Loyola University; others were friends with whom I've "gigged" around town over the years, playing jazz and private parties, as well as quite a few Mardi Gras dances. When I had my first opportunity ten years ago to compose a short curtain raiser for the LPO, I was writing for them. I wanted a New Orleans connection, so I composed a piece called (can you believe it?) "Hurricane."

In the intervening years, four of my eight symphonies were written with the

LPO musicians in mind. All of them are large-scale and elaborate. The latest, premiered in New Orleans on May 11 and 13, is 63 minutes and is in ten inter-connected movements. What an undertaking for any orchestra, but especially the ravaged LPO! It would have been so easy to take the path of least resistance and coast for the abbreviated season, playing tried and true classical repertoire for audiences looking for a palliative musical experience.

That isn't the LPO's way. The parts and score were ready and waiting; I had them notated on state-of-the art computer software, so they looked terrific – neat and clear and in appearance - as professional as the best engraved published music. The conductor, Klauspeter Seibel is an old friend who has premiered “Hurricane” and my other symphonies. He wouldn't hear of a cancellation or postponement, especially under these circumstances. It was all or nothing.

This piece is about the affirmation of the human spirit. Although I wrote it three years ago, it seems by coincidence to be especially timely in New Orleans now. I'll admit that I was apprehensive about the ability of the players to learn this huge piece in just three rehearsals. I shouldn't have been; they rose to the occasion with a force of will that I could hardly have imagined. When it was all over, after the second performance, there were smiles all around. The music had resonated with the players and the audience and had touched a nerve. For those two nights, I felt my work had brought people closer together and made a difference that would help see people through their continuing hardships – at least for a while. I guess that's as much as any composer could ever hope for.

The concluding section in my Seventh Symphony calls for soprano and baritone voices. At the end, they intone a benediction, which is quoted from “Gates of Repentance,” the Jewish prayer book for the High Holy Days. It speaks to me now differently than it did in 2003, when I composed it, because of what happened to New Orleans and to its people. It goes like this:

“For health and healing, for labor and repose, for the ever-renewed beauty of earth and sky, for thoughts of truth and justice which stir us to acts of goodness, and for the contemplation of Your eternal presence which fills us with hope that what is good and lovely cannot perish.”