

## Arts and Entertainment: Shreveport Symphony successfully blends styles

Written by Allen J. M. Smith

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The Jan. 26 concert by the Shreveport Symphony featured music that has changed the traditional concert music business by introducing elements of jazz and blues that are solely American.

The first piece in history to fully accomplish this was George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," a piece that has now become a standard for piano and orchestra, but which was controversial and innovative when it was premiered in 1924.

If Gershwin could have heard this modern-day Shreveport performance of his piece, he would have been very proud, indeed. Piano soloist Jon Nakamatsu totally nailed it. Nakamatsu displayed a rare combination of assertiveness and subtlety, and an understanding of the jazz and blues feel that is rare among classically trained musicians, many of whom, musically speaking, don't get out much (this does not refer to their social lives, of course, only the music). For decades, the concert soloist scene has suffered from an excess of bombast and overstatement. Nakamatsu, however, plays with a grace and precision that has long been missed. His phrasing is absolutely beautiful.

Principal clarinet Tom Phillips stole our hearts with the famous glissando at the beginning of "Rhapsody in Blue." It set a standard of achievement for the rest of the piece that was successfully met by the entire orchestra.

A big band hit from the same era asserts that "It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing." Well, the winds and percussion of the Shreveport Symphony really do have that swing. In the Ravel "Piano Concerto in G," they quickly came to the rescue of the strings at the earliest opportunity. Ultimately, it had that swing, and so was meaningful. This piece, too, completed in 1931, was an innovative fusion of jazz and blues elements that Ravel had heard during a tour of America.

Another innovative bit of fusion was a new piece, "Deadlock," by contemporary composer Ruby Fulton, for orchestra and beat box. A beat box is a person making vocal and breath noises into a highly amplified microphone, which mimic the noises usually made by percussion instruments. The beat box soloist was Shodekeh Talifero, of Baltimore. The piece was structured as a chess match, with each chess piece having its own musical theme.

"Estancia," by Alberto Ginastera, was another modern piece that challenged the orchestra with

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complex, unaccustomed Latin rhythms. Again, the winds, especially the brasses, came gallantly to the rescue and pretty much saved the day.

Four dances from Aaron Copeland's ballet, "Rodeo" also showed a turning point in American music. Written during the Great Depression, it helped establish an American identity and musical style.