

CLASSICAL REVIEW

New conductor infuses NJSO with high-voltage energy

By Ronni Reich
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Jacques Lacombe could hardly have made a stronger impression in his first concert as the designated music director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra.

In his first appearance at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Lacombe began on a personal note with the American premiere of "Sur les Rives du Saint-Maurice," a piece by Jacques Hétu, commissioned last year by the Orchestre symphonique de Trois-Rivières, Lacombe's hometown orchestra.

Hétu, also a native of Trois-Rivières and a friend and collaborator of Lacombe's, died of cancer in February.

The conductor's investment in the music was clear. His presence seemed to infuse the orchestra with a deep, warm, sonorous sound and high-voltage energy — but, then, the piece itself also gave reason for excitement.

A densely packed 15-minute tone poem depicting Trois-Rivières in a prehistoric era, in modern times at an iron forge and in the future, it at times recalled the angular vigor of Stravinsky, at others the lush harmonies and painterly quality of Strauss. Still, it was a new, unusual voice that spoke promisingly of Lacombe's future contemporary offerings.

On more familiar ground, he proved equally engaging. In Brahms' Violin Concerto, soloist Jennifer Koh gave a performance full of raw ferocity. If occasionally erratic, she displayed admirable fearlessness in the work's virtuosic, breathlessly long, undulating lines, which

were poignantly tempered by the sweetness she brought to more reflective moments.

From the first notes through the final gypsy dances, the concerto seemed to be constantly unfolding in a spontaneous, organic way. The second movement, marked "Adagio," seemed a touch fast, and the contrast between sections not as pronounced as it might have been. Still, oboist Robert Ingliss' prominent solo provided a stirring serenade.

Any minor complaints vanished with the introduction of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World." Written in 1893 when the composer was torn between his home and the United States (like Lacombe), the work draws on African-American and Native Amer-

ican melodies as well as Czech folk songs.

Both fittingly earthy and surprisingly refined, the NJSO's newly enhanced sound was put to dazzling use here. Full of depth without ever feeling heavy, thick or unwieldy, the tone also had a luminous shimmer, like crushed velvet catching the light.

As an encore, the NJSO gave a spirited performance of Brahms' "Hungarian Dance" No. 21 orchestrated by Dvorak. This was easily the strongest concert of the season so far, and one looks forward to hearing more.

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New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, "Two Masters: Brahms and Dvorak"

When and where: Tonight at 8, State Theatre, 15 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. Sunday at 3 p.m., New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark

How much: \$20 to \$82. Call (800) 255-3476 or visit njsymphony.org.



JERRY MCCREA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Jacques Lacombe, shown earlier this month at a rehearsal, led the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra through a performance for the first time on Thursday in Newark.

