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MUSIC REVIEW: Conductor delivers electric ASO debut

By ERIC E. HARRISON

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LITTLE ROCK — Philip Mann couldn't have gotten a warmer welcome for his Little Rock debut as music director of the Arkansas Symphony on Saturday night at Little Rock's Robinson Center Music Hall.

And Mann gave it all back to the audience in spades with a truly electrifying inaugural concert.

Before mounting the podium to conduct Antonin Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 in e minor, op.95, "From the New World," Mann spoke about infusing an old familiar work with new energy. That was true of all three warhorses on this "New World" program, particularly the symphony, which simply crackled with it from the first note to the last.

Mann carefully balanced the composer's Bohemian thematic elements and American idioms, and the orchestra responded by delivering on the piece's every detail with care, precision and vigor. The "Largo" second movement, with the simple English horn theme that later turned into the semi-spiritual tune "Going Home," was achingly beautiful.

Equally electrifying was Kevin Cole's solo work in George Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F major, which was superbly matched by the bounce in the orchestra's musical "step." Cole's boyish enthusiasm extended to the introduction of the encore, his own arrangement of Gershwin's "Fascinatin' Rhythm."

Mann turned the ovation that greeted him with perfect timing into the stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner," and the concert's brightness and brilliance began with a standout performance of Leonard Bernstein's Candide Overture.

Moving the battery to the back of the stage and raising it on risers (part of a sizable stage realignment of the orchestra) brought the sound of several percussion instruments forward.

Mann, Cole and the orchestra will second the concert at 3 p.m. today at Robinson, West Markham Street and Broadway, Little Rock. Ticket information is available by calling (501) 666-1761 or at the website, arkansassymphony.org.

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