

Children's concert provides a 'Journey' for all ages

By Christina Linklater, Globe Correspondent | July 19, 2005

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MUSIC REVIEW

On Sunday afternoon, young Bostonians and their families were lured away from the Frog Pond for the first children's concert of the Boston Landmarks Orchestra's summer season. The program at the Parkman Bandstand was appealing and original, with three favorites of the standard repertoire followed by one world premiere, "The Journey of Phillis Wheatley." This was a typical Boston Landmarks event, an important moment in classical music paired with a pleasant afternoon in the park.

A collaboration by poet Carolivia Herron and composer Nkeiru Okoye, "Wheatley" traces the life of the first African-American poet, a slave who lived in Boston and was praised by Voltaire, but whose writing infuriated certain Boston gentlemen who held that a woman of African descent was incapable of verse. Okoye and Herron's spirited account of Wheatley's literal and artistic voyage concentrates on the high points: the Senegal childhood of the girl who would be christened Phillis Wheatley, her education, her literary career, and her eventual emancipation.

While the first-person narration could not be more straightforward, the finely orchestrated music tends toward the complex. The concept of "life in Boston" is musically represented by a brass section. The brass clashes violently with a lyrical string section, which signifies Wheatley herself. Wheatley's literary trial, held to determine whether she was the true author of her verses, culminates in a blunt verdict, "You are approved," accompanied by a smooth homophony of strings and brass. This and many other moments function at several levels, satisfying to an audience of varying ages. A younger child might concentrate on the tunes and the tale, while a teenager might appreciate the often-dissonant interactions of instruments and melodies. An adult could perceive the ambiguous victory of strings falling meekly in step with brass or take pleasure in the brass coming around to the strings' point of view.

Charles Ansbacher first conducted his capable players and an enthusiastically clapping audience through Johann Strauss's "Radetsky March." Leroy Anderson's sweet "Fiddle-Fiddle" was a welcome opportunity to hear Lisa Hennessey's graceful solo flute, and a de Falla-Chapelier Spanish Dance meandered contentedly before culminating with an unexpectedly rushing drive.

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