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REVIEWS

The Sax in Three Guises Gets Local Premiere

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Two venerable musicians long associated with the New York Philharmonic joined forces last week. Leonard Slatkin, who first appeared as a guest conductor more than 50 years ago (in 1974), returned in that capacity on March 26 for the first of three concerts. John Corigliano, whose late father was the orchestra's concertmaster, has composed several works that have dotted the orchestra's repertoire over the years, including world premieres.

Slatkin and Corigliano have been frequent collaborators, this time giving rise to the New York premiere of *Triathlon*, a saxophone concerto in three sizable movements, each calling for a different species of the instrument—soprano, alto, and baritone, successively. The title derives from the competitive sporting event consisting of three different activities performed consecutively. Steven Winn reviewed the [concerto's 2022 world premiere by the San Francisco Symphony](#) and saxophonist Timothy McAllister, who was also the soloist here. "The piece celebrates [the] voices, temperaments and technical capabilities" of each saxophone, Winn wrote, in "feats that range from limber to lyrical, feisty to furious to exultant."

The concerto, which also exists in a version for wind ensemble, opens with an energetic movement called "Leaps" dominated by a jagged, ascending motif and notable for a recurring passage that sounds like squealing. A lyrical midsection leads to a return of the initial material and a smashing finish. The middle movement ("Lines")—the concerto's high point—allows Corigliano's celebrated gift for melody to shine. McAllister's beautiful playing here lingers in the mind more than the work's virtuosic moments, dazzlingly rendered though they were. "Licks," the exuberant final movement, opens with a cadenza that explores the saxophone's capacity for unusual sounds—when notes unexpectedly shift from low to high registers, you almost wonder if a joke were intended. Near the end the soloist shifts back to the soprano sax for the brilliant, high-lying close, which brings back music of the first movement.



Timothy McAllister performs Corigliano's *Triathlon* with Leonard Slatkin and the New York Philharmonic

Triathlon was prefaced by a 12-minute curtain raiser *Double Play* by Cindy McTee, premiered by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2010, when Slatkin was music director. McTee and Slatkin have since married.

The first of its two movements, titled "The Unquestioned Answer"—an allusion to the piece by Charles Ives, which supplied some thematic material—begins austerely, as wisps of atonal, angular lines are heard from solo instruments against a tranquil string background; other lines have a neo-romantic tonal aspect, but it's all very fragmentary

The ensuing "Tempus Fugit" has more forthright appeal, both in its use of orchestral resources and, especially, in its rhythmic drive. After a moderately amusing opening in which woodblocks and other percussion instruments imitate the tick-tocking of pendulum clocks, pulsating rhythms charged by jazzy syncopations take over. Slatkin engineered a handsomely balanced performance that brought out the languor of the first movement and the teaming energy of the second.

After two works from the present century, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47 (1937) brought something akin to the warmth that a Beethoven symphony might have supplied. The Fifth is, after all, the great symphonist's most popular, a status not unrelated to his effort at rehabilitation with Soviet authorities, after the disfavor provoked by his opera *Lady Macbeth*, by writing "accessible" music, as some critics might call it.

As with much Shostakovich, it is tempting to look for hidden meanings. The second movement, despite its appealing ländler rhythm, can take on a sardonic tone, but Slatkin seemed to accept its jocularity at face value in a reading that, over all, was scrupulously conceived and handsomely played. The profound but discursive third movement, which benefited notably from the flute and oboe solos, unfolded purposefully and ended, like the first movement, with otherworldly tones from the celeste. The assertive last movement brought the symphony to a strong finish, even if at times Slatkin might have given the orchestra freer rein to generate tension.

Photo by Chris Lee



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