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Symphony taps a local talent for night of song

By PAUL DENISON
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They'll begin with a brisk run along New York City's Upper West Side, take a breather for five exquisite German art songs and then march on into a Soviet-era tribute to a 13th century Russian war hero.

It's all in a night's work for conductor Giancarlo Guerrero



Milagro Vargas

and the Eugene Symphony Orchestra, which will continue its season Thursday evening with Philip Rothman's "Morningside Run," Gustav Mahler's Rückert Lieder and a concert piece that Sergey Prokofiev extracted from his score for Sergei Eisenstein's film "Alexander Nevsky."

Mezzo-soprano Milagro Vargas of Eugene will sing Mahler's lieder and also will be featured in the next-to-last movement of "Alexander Nevsky."

"I'm a huge fan of hers, especially her Philip Glass opera recordings, which I own," Guerrero says, adding that when he came to Eugene he was surprised to find Vargas living here and teaching at the University of Oregon.

Mahler's Rückert Lieder are based on poems by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), a scholar of Asian languages.

"The texts are absolutely gorgeous, beautiful and very intimate," Guerrero says. He notes that the composer's instructions simply call for a singer, without specifying which voice. "I've heard it done by baritone and tenor," he says, "but I think it works better with a mezzo."

In his program notes for this concert, Portland music

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writer James McQuillen rates the fourth Rückert song — "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen (I have become lost to the world)" — among Mahler's finest works.

Vargas feels the same way about that particular song and about the Rückert Lieder in general.

"The poems are beautiful, and Mahler's orchestration is absolutely stunning," she says. "I love singing Mahler, and these songs are particularly dear to me because I remember hearing my teacher, the late Jan DeGaetani, sing them in concerts when I was a student. They were also among the last pieces she recorded before she died."

McQuillen writes that Eisenstein's epic film about the Russian prince who drove back 13th century Swedish and Teutonic invaders was "unabashed, xenophobic propaganda" produced under the squinty eye of Joseph Stalin, a censor nobody dared to defy.

Yet Prokofiev's score for the movie was good enough on its own that he shaped it into a seven-piece cantata for chorus and orchestra.

"It's a very nationalistic, proud work, celebrating Russian greatness and power for kicking out the invaders," Guerrero says.

After the battle, Vargas will be heard in "The Field of the Dead," which she describes as "a haunting lament about loved ones slain during the battle."

Young composer plans a busy visit to Eugene

Composer Philip Rothman's contribution to Thursday night's Eugene Symphony concert will last roughly nine minutes, the time it takes conductor Giancarlo Guerrero and the orchestra to jog through his "Morningside Run" overture.

But Rothman's visit to Eugene will last five busy days, although much of what he does will not be seen by the general public.

As a Music Alive composer in residence, Rothman will attend a Eugene Youth Symphony rehearsal and concert, join Guerrero in a concert preview and rehearse local high school composers for a pre-concert presentation at 7 p.m. Thursday.

Music Alive is an American Symphony Orchestra League program funded by

the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Aaron Copland Fund for Music.

Last October, as part of a residency subsidized partly by a Meet the Composers grant, Rothman worked with musicians at Lane Community College and the University of Oregon.

"He's one of the most gifted composers of the younger generation," Guerrero says. "He is very tonal, with a gift not only for melody but also for orchestral color. Like me, he's a former percussionist, and he uses the percussion section extremely well."

Guerrero says Rothman's residency is an example of the Eugene Symphony's interest in new music and young composers, "to put them in the spotlight nationwide."

The Eugene Symphony Chorus, prepared by Sharon Paul, will sing "Alexander Nevsky" in Russian. The chorus also will sing Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony, in German, next month.

"Thanks to Sharon Paul's work over the last three years, the chorus has become a great asset, and I can challenge them with great choral works," Guer-

rero says.

Rothman's "Morningside Run" overture, which will open the concert, musically reflects the neighborhoods that pop up during his morning runs along Riverside Drive in Manhattan.

"It has many fast moments, like the feeling of wind behind you," Guerrero says. "I think it's certain to become part of American standard repertoire."