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MUSIC REVIEW; Leonard Slatkin's Gamble on the Road Less Traveled

By ALLAN KOZINN

You have to give Leonard Slatkin points for being a daring programmer. For his visit to Carnegie Hall with the National Symphony Orchestra, on Wednesday and Thursday, his focus was on new and comparatively new music, with New York premieres of three works (Cindy McTee's Symphony No. 1: "Ballet for Orchestra" on Wednesday; Kaija Saariaho's "Nymphaea Reflection" and Einojuhani Rautavaara's Clarinet Concerto on Thursday), as well as revivals of rarities by Colin McPhee and Aaron Copland.

Of the standard works he conducted, only Ravel's "Valse" was a war horse; Weber's "Invitation to the Dance" and the Tchaikovsky Second Symphony are heard less frequently.

Did his gamble work? Based on the Wednesday concert (the Saariaho-Rautavaara-Tchaikovsky program was reviewed from Washington recently), the answer is yes (artistically) and not really (commercially). The works were stylistically varied and consistently involving, and the performances were among the best this orchestra had given in New York in many years. Yet the empty seats suggested that the hall's constituency is less interested in programming adventures than in hearing what it already likes.

It is hard to imagine that even the most conservative listener would not have found something to be enthusiastic about here. The program's centerpiece was Ms. McTee's work, a four-movement tour of dance forms through which philosophically broader materials are woven. The lush string writing in the slow movement, for example, makes passing allusions to Krzysztof Penderecki's Requiem and Barber's Adagio for Strings; a touch of "La Valse" wafts through the Waltz movement; and the finale touches on everything from laid-back country fiddling to the brutal fortissimo chords of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and some decidedly jazzy brass writing.

Ms. McTee's sense of organization kept the work from becoming a pastiche: as diverse as its ideas were, they seemed to unfold naturally within an orchestral fabric that used the ensemble's full coloristic range. The work's dance impulses also gave the program its theme.

Copland's "Dance Symphony," created in 1930 from sketches for an early ballet, was given an appealingly propulsive, bright-hued performance that highlighted the orchestra's winds nicely. And McPhee's "Tabuh-Tabuhan" (1936), based on Balinese music, with its repetitive figuration, now sounds like a prescient blend of John Adams and Leonard Bernstein.

The Weber, in Berlioz's orchestration, evoked the 19th-century ballroom and was the perfect curtain-raiser. And Mr. Slatkin's broad-boned, virtuosically fluid account of "La Valse," which closed the concert, hammered home the idea of dance as an engine of symphonic music.