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Posted on Sat, Oct. 15, 2005

Charlotte Symphony pays tribute to textile mill villages

TIM WHITMIRE
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. - The musicians from the Charlotte Symphony are in rhythm with the clacking textile loom. They leave the stage one by one, until only composer David Crowe remains, keeping time with a "stump fiddle" made from a rake handle and bottle caps. Then he, too, is gone, leaving only the rattle of the loom to fade away.

It's a purposeful ending to Crowe's "Mill Village: A Piedmont Rhapsody" - which serves as an elegy to the long decline of North Carolina's once-vibrant textile industry.

The 30-minute piece - incorporating video, spoken word and even the passing around of textiles woven in the old mills - is the product of a two-year effort by the Charlotte Symphony to create a work drawing on the mill village experience.

"The orchestra is sort of similar to the textile business - they're both archaic institutions that need to revive themselves somehow," said Crowe, a 59-year-old native of upstate New York who remembers childhood drives through that region's struggling mill towns. "Community involvement seems to be the way to do that."

Created with grants from the North Carolina Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, the "Mill Community Project" was honored with an award for excellence in community engagement at this summer's annual conference of the American Symphony Orchestra League.

A recent performance at a church in downtown Charlotte illustrated the work's potential for expanding the symphony's audience, as both regulars of the "first Tuesdays" music series and newcomers filled the pews and stood in the aisles.

Tom Hanchett, historian at Charlotte's Levine Museum of the New South, helped Crowe - also a percussionist and conductor - research "Mill Village" and said the project helps reconnect classical music with its roots.

"Often, in our lifetimes, classical music has been something that has tried to remove itself from the everyday, has tried to be elite," Hanchett said. "What David and the symphony are saying is that music belongs to us all, it comes from us all."



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Crowe's work is rooted in the mill villages, company owned and company operated, that thrived in North Carolina in the early and middle 20th century, as workers traded some of their freedom for a stable lifestyle and a lifetime of employment. As the villages disappeared in the 1960s, so too did the mills they served, many of which have since shuttered under competition from cheap foreign labor.

The transition of the region's textile industry continues. Since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, North Carolina has lost more than 160,000 textile and apparel industry jobs.

A group called Preservation North Carolina is surveying the state's abandoned mills to catalog and determine the best way to reuse the buildings. In Kannapolis, former Cannon Mills owner David Murdock plans to raze the old Pillowtex mills to build a gleaming biotechnology campus in their place.

Crowe worked with Hanchett and others at his museum to draw upon existing source materials - including oral histories from former village residents - in composing a four-movement work filled with allusions to water wheels, trains and steam whistles, Saturday night dance music and Sunday morning church hymns.

The accompanying video uses footage shot starting in the 1930s by an itinerant filmmaker named H. Lee Waters, who traveled the South filming everyday life in cities, towns and villages. He would screen the results at the local cinema, charging residents a nickel to watch themselves on-screen - a sort of early form of reality programming.

During the prologue and epilogue, as the musicians enter and exit, the rhythm of the loom is insistent, a nod to the hectic pace and never-ending work in the mills.

And the music becomes melancholy as Mills, who narrates the piece, reads words of resentment directed at the mill owner: "We work in his mill. We live in his houses. Our children go to his school. ... We spend our leisure time after the 11-hour day - those of us who can read - in his reading room. ... And when we die, we are buried in his cemetery."

For now, the piece is written for only a dozen instruments. But Crowe is writing an orchestral arrangement that could be included as part of the full symphony's repertoire.

The symphony is fielding inquiries from regional arts groups that want to bring the piece to their communities. It is also developing a "Mill Village" curriculum for schools, and seeking funding for a CD/DVD release and documentary.

"I want it to live on as a piece," said Susan Miville, the symphony's director of education and outreach. "I also want the process that we went through as a symphony to live on."

Crowe said one of the challenges in composing "Mill Village" was memorializing a lost way of life without sentimentalizing it. The composer said he consciously tried to balance the generally nostalgic - and often utopian - accounts of life in the mill villages that he heard from former residents now in their 60s, 70s and 80s.

"I have very mixed feelings" about the mill villages, Crowe said. "These communities wouldn't have existed in a society that wasn't segregated. That was the appeal of these communities to investors. ...

"That's not to say that good things didn't come out of it. But I'm still surprised at the loyalty that some of the people felt to the mill owners."

End ADV for Oct. 15-16

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