

Orchestra adds visual element to attract new audience: puppetry

By Kurt Loft, Times Correspondent

At a time when classical music groups struggle to sell Mozart and Beethoven, the Florida Orchestra is opening the new year with a bold and ambitious program unlike any it has offered in its 40 seasons.

Next weekend's all-Russian fare features Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, a ballet about a puppet that falls in love with a ballerina. It was made famous by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1911, although most ensembles today perform one of two suites the composer later orchestrated.

The Florida Orchestra will take a gamble by reviving Stravinsky's original — with a further twist. Joining the musicians will be a choreographed troupe of string-controlled marionettes, projected silhouettes, rod puppets and more elaborate characters that stand 9 feet tall.

"*Petrushka* is a puppet ballet about puppets," said music director Stefan Sanderling. "So we thought, 'Why not use these giant puppets to portray the characters?'"

The production is much more than spectacle. Like similar groups everywhere, the Florida Orchestra each season fights for its financial life, a struggle only exacerbated by the recession. The musicians often play to too many empty seats, and young people — the potential audiences of the future — prefer more visual thrills than a homegrown Mahler symphony can provide.

A fully staged *Petrushka* is the orchestra's way of reaching out to those new audiences.

"We have to find better ways to be relevant," Sanderling said. "Our way of offering classical music has to change. No, we don't have to change the music, we just have to change how we present it."

The joint venture with the local Bits 'N Pieces Puppet Theatre, which created and will operate the puppets, appears to be a good fit, both parties say. Founded in 1975, the puppet company has built a national reputation for its colorful touring productions in schools and cultural centers, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Although Bits 'N Pieces usually focuses on young audiences, this version of Stravinsky's ballet is part of the orchestra's meat-and-potatoes Masterworks subscription series.

"We're doing this for the regular orchestra audience," the theater's executive director, Jerry Bickel, said from his studio in Dover, east of Tampa. "It's not a ballet for young children. That's why it's such a great challenge."

Another feat: "Taking a ballet like *Petrushka* and turning it into a puppet production," said Bickel, whose team has been hard at work through the holiday season creating the puppets. "I think this is going to be quite a wonderful spectacle."

Regardless of the visual treatment, *Petrushka* is a masterpiece of the orchestral repertoire, the second of three early ballets that brought Stravinsky worldwide fame. The first, *The Firebird*, is an exotic, color-drenched score closely aligned to the late 19th century Russian school. The third, *Rite of Spring*, is a rhythmic tour de force that caused a riot at its premiere in Paris in 1913.

Stylistically, *Petrushka* falls somewhere between the two, and it remains Sanderling's personal favorite. The music is sonorous, magical, at times dissonant, and in the end, sentimental.



[MELISSA LYTTLE | Times]

Petrushka gets his mask fitted by puppetmaker Holli Rubin. Bits 'N Pieces Puppet Theatre has created many elaborate puppets for performances of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*.

The plot — a tragedy disguised as a comedy — revolves around a fatal menage a trois: a clown named Petrushka, the Ballerina and the Blackamoor. In the first scene, an old wizard casts his spell upon the audience as the curtain rises on a puppet theater at a Russian fair in the 1830s, the atmosphere enlivened by a carnival of rhythm and harmony.

The second scene opens in Petrushka's gloomy room, where the Ballerina appears and Petrushka falls in love. In the next scene, she enters the Blackamoor's room and the two make love as Petrushka enters, only to be chased away.

The final scene returns to the crowd, which witnesses the Blackamoor killing Petrushka. As the wizard drags the dead puppet away, the ghost of Petrushka appears overhead, and the music fades, ending on an unresolved note.

As the apparition stares down, the audience realizes that Petrushka is more than a doll stuffed with straw; emboldened by love, he comes to life, and dies from the power of his emotions.

"In a certain way, it's real, just transformed into puppets," said Sanderling, whose program also includes Stravinsky's *Circus Polka* and Borodin's *Second Symphony*. "The story is very much human, of 'I love her, but she loves someone else.' And in the end, Petrushka dies. It's a sad story."

The upcoming production has its risks — what if one of the 9-foot puppets falls down? Sanderling will have his hands full with both an intricate score and a stage full of action. But the point is to engage a first-time ticket buyer while also appealing to those who have supported the orchestra for years.

"We want to get away from the usual program of overture, concerto and symphony," he says. "We have to reach out to new audiences and show the community that we are relevant."

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