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Soloist all wet at colorful KSO concert

By Mary Ellyn Hutton
Post music writer

As a 27-year member of the renowned Percussion Group Cincinnati, ensemble-in-residence at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, percussionist James Culley has struck, shaken or bowed just about everything.

Saturday night in Northern Kentucky University's Greaves Hall, he got wet doing it.

Soloist with the Kentucky Symphony in Chinese composer Tan Dun's 1999 "Water Concerto," Culley slapped and patted water in a large basin, dipped and struck gongs, agogo bells and salad bowls in water, poured water from plastic cups, and used flip flops to beat the open end of large plastic tubes sunk into water.

Joining him were KSO percussionists Matt Hawkins and Taft Hall, who performed water percussion in basins of their own. All three also played waterphone, a hand-held device with steel prongs that can be filled with water and made to emit eerie sounds with the edge of a violin bow. The KSO provided occasional melodies, rhythmic interjections and beguiling sounds such as brassy playing their mouthpieces.

An added element - and the theme of the concert ("Fancy Colours") - was lighting. The water basins were lit from below, "splashes" of pastel danced on the walls, and in a final picturesque touch, Culley raised a colander high in the air and let the water spill into his basin.

Everything on the program, the KSO season finale led music director James R. Cassidy, included elaborate lighting by On Location Lighting Systems of Erlanger.

Mastermind was production designer Rob Holland. Holland, former master electrician and lighting instructor at CCM, filled the role envisioned by Russian composer Alexander Scriabin a century ago, i.e. to play an instrument that emits color rather than music.

Holland's "instrument" was a dozen automated lighting fixtures mounted on trusses around the orchestra, programmed and operated by Holland from a console in the center of the hall.

The hall was hazed (water vapor with a trace of mineral oil) to enhance the effects.

Also on the program were Scriabin's "Poem of Ecstasy," Michael Torke's waltz-like "Bright Blue Music" and Debussy's "Nocturnes" with women of the KSO Chorale.

Torke's 1986 work, so-called because Torke associates blue with the key of D Major, made a fine opener with exuberant playing and wavy "blue sky" hues on the walls.

"Nocturnes" brought out the rainbow - violet and yellow for "Nuages," fuchsia and red for "Fetes" and pale, "watery" textures on the ceiling for "Sirenes." Musically, it was not up to snuff, with many subs filling in for regular KSO players and the women's voices sounding thin and ragged.

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Scriabin's concluding "Poem" fared better. A 20-minute work suggestive of carnal and spiritual bliss, the music builds on a recurring trumpet motif to an ecstatic climax. Scored for a huge orchestra, it taxed the manpower of the 70-plus KSO.

Still they made a full, rich sound when needed, and Holland pulled out all the stops.

The spots blinked white at the audience now and then, and what looked like love knots flashed over the walls amid a myriad of colors, ending with fire engine red.

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